DIGBY

By the Same Author

THE STORM AND THE SILENCE

GEORDIE

THE PILLAR

DIGBY

A Novel by

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There are no real people
in this book

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To Barkie

CHAPTER ONE

DIGBY P. ROSS, Second, was alone in a high room in the city. Above him were ceiling, roof garden, flagstaff, sky; below him thirty-two storeys of Ross Corporation.

He looked at the portraits of his late father and of Madeleine, at the Harvard group, at the air-photo of his fishing camp in New Brunswick, at the Audubon prints, at the exquisite Shiraz, at the bookcase where Buchan Henty Forester Stevenson Kipling Longfellow Cather Service were assembled, at that accursed ebony octagon, at all the elegant unbusinesslike array which was the office of a most businesslike man. He saw the muted place with loathing.

What can it be? he thought. What is this sink of despair that's been taking me deeper and deeper for months? What is the evil streak that finally got the better of me yesterday and made me shout abuse at my innocent secretary, and do something far worse than that?

He picked up his paperweight now, and weighed it in his right hand. For two pins, he thought, for one goddam little pin I'd throw it through the window. He dropped the thing like a hot coal.

And to think that in all my fifteen years of service to the corporation —impeccable service, I may justifiably say—to think that I have never before even raised my voice. True, I have been severe. True, I have been ruthless against chicanery. But angry, never. And to think of the selfless devotion and loyalty Miss Prendergast has given me; and she is standing there in her horn-rimmed spectacles, so damned expectant and perfect and patient, that's the very thing that made me do it, take it out on the one person who . . . *Will you for God's sake not pester me?* CRASH, against the mahogany door.

He switched on. "Yes?"

" Mr. Jenks is calling from Wyoming—on the scrambler-phone, Mr. Ross. Will you speak? "

" Put him on, please."

He dealt with Max Jenks, head man on the A.E.C. Construction project, next to Digby himself probably the most important of the thirty-odd thousand servants of the Ross Corporation. *We are all servants*, Digby was wont to say, as his father had said before him. But he was a formidable master.

" Is the weather bad with you, Digby? " asked Mr. Jenks, who had been worrying lately about the President's courteous gloom sagging over long-distance wires. Not that his decisions seemed any less sound, but the best of decisions cannot inspire confidence when made hopelessly.

" The temperature is ninety-six outside," Digby said. " And the humidity is ninety. Good-bye, Max."

The worst thing about it, he thought, isn't that I lost control of myself. That's unforgivable enough. The worst thing is that I can't trust myself any more. The worst thing is that having done it once, I'll do it again and again easier and easier. And do you realise I might have killed her? Oh true, I didn't mean to hit the woman, even in that moment of pathological fury.

And another worst thing is that I go out and spend four hundred and ninety-six dollars in an agony of remorse and I come back and summon her tear-blotched from the Rest Room and I say: *Miss Prendergast, I owe you a sincere apology for my unpardonable behaviour. The years of our association have been very very happy. . . . Please accept this small brooch as a measure and a token of my regret*, and she makes me pin the goddam thing on her bosom and she says *Oh it's lovely, Mr. Ross. It's the loveliest brooch. Why, it's just lovely.* Enough lovelies to drive a fellow crazy, and love, yes she loves me more than ever which is not only because of an emerald-diamond brooch but that same horrible thing which makes ill-treated creatures love their oppressor, and the very worst thing is that she says: *I'll wear it always.*

Well, she's wearing it to-day and she'll wear it every other day and any time I see it will be a reminder until I can't bear it. *But you can get another secretary.* No, I can't get another secretary. I couldn't endure a change. I'd jump out the window first. I mustn't think of

that. And the drop of two points last week, no reason for it except one reason in a stronger market: *I'm not sure about Ross Corporation. People say Ross himself has lost his grip. But he's only forty-one. I always heard he was the brightest guy in the whole American construction business. He may have been, but there are plenty can't take it. He wouldn't be the first.* . . . And the shareholders—those thousands of good plain American men and women to whom I am responsible.

" Come in please, Miss Prendergast."

He looked at the rough notes he had made for his speech to the Boston Chamber of Commerce; then he looked at Miss Prendergast waiting in front of him, eyes downcast at her pad, as she had waited countless times in the five years of his Presidency, a supremely efficient girl. Quite a nice-looking girl behind those glasses, he thought now. I never noticed before. Just another sign of a lost grip. He noticed also that her hands were trembling very slightly. *She's scared of me.* And he was ashamed that the small sadistic corner of him relished that.

Shall I get her to take it? Or do it on the dictaphone? Now I can't even make my mind up. Digby strode over to the great window, and stared at New York. I used to love it. Now I hate it. I can't stand it a day longer.

" Miss Prendergast," he said. " I've decided to take three days rest. Call Jake Doon at the camp and tell him I'm coming. Have the Grumman ready at three. Tell the members of the board. Tell Mrs. Ross, and say I'll be home for lunch. I'll give you a draft for the Boston speech at two o'clock. Get some six-pound nylon leader from Abercrombie's. All that as quickly as you can, please, and don't let anyone disturb me. I shall dictaphone a draft for the Secretary of Labour meantime; let me have it at two, please." This was all much terser than his habit.

" Yes, Mr. Ross. Mr. Manning was anxious to see you about the new escalator clause."

" At twelve-thirty, then."

He forced himself to smile at Miss Prendergast. " Thank you," he said.

She half-turned to go, and then made a personal comment between them, a thing she hardly ever did. " I'm so glad you're taking a

little vacation, Mr. Ross. You've been looking so . . . so sort of peaky lately," and went out.

Peaky! he thought sourly. Who ever heard of a secretary telling her boss he looked *peaky*?

Digby let himself into the apartment. He was nervous. "Hallo there," he said, and kissed his wife's cheek.

"I do think it's selfish not to give me a little warning."

"I know, darling," he said. "I'm sorry. I suddenly realised at noon that I must have a few days' rest. It's this endless racket, and the heat."

"I wish I could decide just like that to go away."

"Why not come with me?" But the only time Madeleine had ever visited the camp, she made Jake fell trees to improve the vista, and complained so incessantly about black-flies that Digby had the area sprayed with D.D.T., which killed thousands of trout.

"I can't possibly come, Digby. Surely you know that! Surely you know I have the emergency meeting of the Poets' Association to-morrow, and the Artists' Federation on Thursday, and heaven knows what else." She sighed.

"Sorry," he said. "I forgot." But he was not sorry. Madeleine's idea of a busy life was one engagement, and the rest of the day to fill in with hair appointments and fittings and interesting poets of genius and varied cultural activities. He used to feel indulgent toward her much ado about nothing; it was worth it to have her contented and so damned beautiful always. But lately it annoyed him. He was devoted to her and he loved her, but it annoyed him.

He could guess what she said to her poets. *It's so sad for business people, losing themselves in mammon. Now, take my Digby. He used to have a real natural feeling for beauty. He loved poetry—simple poetry of course. But I can hardly get him to read a word nowadays except C. S. Forester and things like that.*

The contempt for what enabled her to be patroness to these long-haired leeches, that was the thing that made him resentful. That and her condescension to his poor utilitarian brains.

I must stop it, he thought. I really must stop thinking this way about Madeleine. Aloud, he was his courteous unprovocative self as

he ate a hurried lunch, and when she helped him pack his bag. She always loved to do things for him; he was her man, her selfish man. So does Miss Prendergast like doing things for me; only she doesn't demand and complain the whole darned time.

Looking back on it now, his trouble with Miss Prendergast seemed smaller; it even seemed trivial except for the quite unnecessary price he had paid for that brooch. But his unspoken troubles with Madeleine were not trivial. They were growing and growing after ten childless years of marriage with a wife nine years younger than himself—she was still only thirty-two. *You used to take me out dancing, darling,* she said last week. *And we had fun. But you seem so blue lately and you never want to do a thing except work and work even after dinner and take two days occasionally at that camp. It's so dull and so unfair.*

I'm tired, Madeleine, I guess. Yes, it was unfair, and his fault, and he was forty-one—getting old. That must be why he was tired.

Olaf, the houseman, took down his bag.

Madeleine kissed him. "Have a nice time," she said. "And promise not to let that pilot fly in bad weather."

Two evenings later Digby sat under the white pine. He watched the sun touch forest tops beyond the lake, widen, flatten—going, going; gone now. If only it didn't have to happen. If only it wasn't so absolutely inevitable that the sun would set and the loons would call again and Jake would make another grass-roots remark and it would be time for bed and time for breakfast.

The weather had been fine, with a breeze to keep the flies down; they had taken their limit of trout on both days. Digby should be feeling better. He felt worse. He felt physically well and mentally terrible. He wished he was back in New York. He grunted.

"See here, Dig," said Jake, mentioning it for the first time. "You were always a quiet kind of guy, but as happy as the next man. This year you're different. You're mopey. You don't even strike a fish like you meant it. Whassamatter, Dig?" Jake rolled an inch or two back and an inch or two forward on his log.

Don't call me Dig. He wanted to shout that over the water. Nobody else ever called him Dig, but only old Jake who was his employee and his good friend—a plain sardonic New Brunswicker.

"I don't know, Jake," he said. "I don't know what the hell's the matter. Overwork, I guess."

"You workin' any harder than last year and the year before and the year before that?"

"Not much."

"Well, it ain't overwork then." Jake was a simple man. He knew everything Yes or No. He generally did too. "Is it a blonde?"

"No," he said sourly. Madeleine was a brunette. It was Madeleine, It was all Madeleine's fault. "What did you say?"

"I said it's the groove you're in, if you ask me. It's never doing nothing different."

"Isn't this different?"

"Two days this trip, three the last, up and down in that goddam plane. What good's that to anybody? No sooner here than wantin' to be some other place. Restless as a skunk in springtime. There's your trouble, Dig."

"I wish you wouldn't call me Dig."

"Okay, Mr. Ross."

"Don't call me Mr. Ross."

Jake turned and stared at Digby in the gloaming. "Say!" he said. "You sure have got it bad."

"I know, Jake." Of all the people he employed, or had ever employed, Jake alone treated him without deference. Jake gave him the respect of one man for another man; and now he withheld that. Why, even his friends at the Racket Club and Piping Rock had been different lately. *Hallo there, Digby*, they would say much the same as ever. Then after a few minutes their eyes would glaze over, and he would see they were bored and being too damned polite to be true. *Nice seeing you.* Off they would slide.

He listened to what Jake was saying:

"There was one time, must be fifteen years ago when I was rising forty-one, just about your age, Dig. Well, it was a long cold winter, and I cut pulp and hauled it from early November to the last of March. Same grind day in day out and not much different from other years except it was colder and longer. Well, when March come round, something got into me, Dig. I don't know what it was unless it's your same trouble and round forty's a bad time of life, anyways, when

a man sees a dry old road ahead. I began to hate the woods, I got to feel they was out to get me. And another thing, I was being hard on the wife. I started saying, *What d'you call this for a man's supper*, and *For Chrissake don't jabber at me when I'm readin' the paper*, and, *If that baby don't pipe down, I'll put it in the snow to cool.* One night I smacked her face as near as dammit. Well, that set me thinking, angry at the work, angry at night, no good for nothing. *You'd better get the hell out of here, Jake Doon.* I says to myself, *before you put an axe in your ankle, and before worse happens with Mabel.* The big thaw come on then, and we couldn't haul no more. Well, I got my money, which was a fair stack of dollars even in those days, and no rich sport paying me a wage, and I went to the wife. *Mabel*, I says. *Here's three hundred. I'm gonna get the hell out of here before something blows. I'll be back in a month.*

" *You better get out of here*, she said, sore as hell by that time, *before I take a carver to you. And don't come back with that bad language, and don't come back till you're fit to live with.* I can remember her sayin' it."

Jake looked over his shoulder. The light was on in the camp kitchen. Mrs. Doon was in there beyond the fly-screen. He lowered his voice:

" Well, I thumbed a ride fifty miles to St. Stephen and I got on the Greyhound bus. Next day we was at Boston. Oh man, is that a city! The same night after I'd had a couple and still nowhere to bed down and only the clothes that was on me, I took in a movie. I wasn't feeling good, but I was feeling some better. I felt a whole heap better when I discovered what was in the next seat in the dark there beside me. The movie was love-stuff too, and that helped, and afterwards I said very polite, *Hows' about a steak?* We had a couple of steaks and a couple more drinks, and before I knew where I was I'd been welcomed home to bed and breakfast. Ever hear of such a bit of luck?

" Now, Dig, I never told this to a soul. She may have been a bad girl, that, but she was good too—human. Sometimes I wonder what happened to her since. Well, it was a one-room apartment, and we was shacked up the whole month, me sleeping late, and her going out to work, and me looking at the stores and going to the movies and taking a drink and watching the women and sittin' on

the Common and back by five and her home early. It was kind of tiring but right cosy. Mebbe it was the best month of my life though I wouldn't like the wife to know, and I never stretched my vows before or since. I come home broke, feeling like a million dollars.

" Mabel took one look at me and she said: *I see you're cured, Jake Doon. Don't tell me nothing about the doctor. Just go split kindling.*

" I'm not saying you're needin' a blonde, Dig, because mebbe you ain't and mebbe Mrs. Ross wouldn't—well what I'm sayin' is you need the same as I did—something different."

" I never knew you liked cities," Digby said. He had even smiled once or twice at Jake's story. " I thought you'd hate all the rush and the people and the traffic."

" For a clever fella . . ." Jake began. But he shrugged. " Being in a rut's fine. A rut keeps a man contented till it gets too deep and he can't see out the damn' thing, and the more he goes back and forward the deeper it gets. So what the hell. Did you ever take a month's vacation these last five years? Did you ever take more'n a week at a stretch?"

" No, Jake," said Digby. " But it's been a busy period and I have many responsibilities. After all, I am the head of a great corporation."

Jake spat. The one loon laughed, and the other answered. Both were silhouetted against the western glow as they swam to a meeting. Ripples spread about, subsided. The loons faced one another, making uncanny loving sounds amid quiet. It was too dark to see their formal antics. Mosquitoes hummed. It was time to go in. Jake was certainly surely inevitably going to say something infuriating. He did: " Daddy loon's head of a corporation."

That was going too far. He's my employee after all, Digby thought angrily. He stood up.

" No offence meant, Dig," said Jake. He sounded kind again, not being funny. " You're a fine fella—mebbe the best man I know—and I don't like to see you down in the dumps, no more good to yourself than a chicken's teeth is to a chicken. You'll have to snap out of it some way."

They walked along the dark path to the cabin. " Perhaps I could take the whole of August," Digby said, half to himself. " I'll have to do something. But where? What? The fishing's no good then. If

we go to Mount Desert, it'll be the same old gang. If we go to the Cape, it'll be worse. And my wife doesn't like driving . . ."

Jake coughed. "It's none of my damn' business, Mr. Ross," he said at the doorway with unusual diffidence, even embarrassment. "But whyn't you go alone? Make more of a change like."

"I wouldn't . . ." Digby began, but stopped himself. "Well, good night, Jake." They parted. It would be unthinkable to go away for that long without Madeleine. Damn Jake! he thought. Damned interfering fool! He's always had a grudge against Madeleine since she made him do some work around here for a change.

In the old days a drink would relax Digby if he was tired or fed-up. Now it forced the core of melancholy deeper. But he took one all the same. He was lonely. He wished he had asked Jake in. He did not like to be alone with that 6.5 mm. rifle. Oh, God, he thought. What can I do?

He looked at the books—Doughty's *Eastern Birds*, *Mammals of North America*, *Upland Game*, *Some Stalks in the Himalayas*, *The Art of the Dry Fly*, *Tales of the Jungle*, *Two Years Before the Mast*, the *Oxford Book of English Verse* and so on and so on and so on, those dull books. I'll take the last one on the middle shelf, he said to himself. Whatever it is.

The last book on the middle shelf was entitled *Highland Days*. He sat down in the big chair in his comfortable cabin beside a Canadian Lake. He heard the ululating loons. He heard the voices of Jake and Mrs. Jake. The sounds were hateful, the woods were hostile, the city was an enemy. He would have to choose the most boring book of the lot. He dropped it, picked it up, dropped it finally, unaware that a dull book had planted a lively seed.

He went despairingly to bed. To-morrow back to New York, back to Madeleine, back to work. He slept.

Miss Prendergast wore a gigantic brooch and no spectacles. She was all glittering brooch, and all Miss Prendergast secret beyond it. *Do you think you could unpin it for me, Mr. Ross? Shall we shack up, Mr. Ross?* He awoke sweating in the middle of the night.

CHAPTER TWO

NEXT AFTERNOON they had to fly a hundred miles out of course to avoid storms in Maine. Digby did not reach the apartment till seven-thirty.

"Anyone home? Are you there, Madeleine?"

"Yes," she called from the drawing-room.

She wore a short evening dress, shoulders bare. It was made of some silvery metallic-looking stuff. He had not thought much about Madeleine, except carpingly, in the days he had been away, but he saw her again with the old jolt of pleasure.

"I'm just going out, Digby," she said. "Miss Prendergast didn't tell me till noon that you were coming back to-night. It's too bad." She turned her mouth away as he bent to kiss her. "Don't muss me up, darling."

A cheek was not much of a welcome from your wife leaving right away for some party. Neither of them ever went out alone. Oh, well. "Where are you dining?"

"With the Bartletts. Craig Proctor is coming to fetch me."

"Who's Craig Proctor?" Digby poured himself a drink and sat down at the other end of the sofa.

"Do be careful of the brocade, Digby, in those dirty clothes. Craig Proctor is the author of *Picnic at Golgotha*, the new play everybody's raving about. He's charming."

"I don't think the name of his play is particularly charming."

Madeleine smiled. "Dear Digby," she said. "Did you catch lots of trout? And how was your quaint friend Jake?"

"Jake was all right," he said. He felt a shiver start in the back of his head and run right down. He wanted to seize hold of Madeleine

and rip the new Dior dress into shreds with that noise of tearing calico, not that it was calico. He had often been resentful in the past, and he had never shown it. But now about something quite trivial—going out to dinner, not wanting to be mussed up, dear Digby trying to talk of things intellectual, quaint Jake—now he felt a violent urge to show her who was master. He had practised self-control all his life. He battled the primitive enemy. "What have you been doing with yourself, Madeleine?"

"It's been rather lonely without you," she said, looking at the nails of her right hand one by one. How predatory, how long supple scarlet-ended. "Except that I've been so madly busy I haven't had a moment to think." She closed one hand into hiding and did the other. "Digby, you're very whiffy in that bush shirt. I can smell you from here."

Digby placed his long glass carefully on the little disc thing to stop puddles on the mahogany. He stood up, went round the table, put a hand on the outside of each of her damned bare shoulders and lifted her to her feet. He stared down at her. "So you can smell me," he said.

"Yes, I can." Surprised, perhaps a little scared, annoyed. "What's the matter?"

"This," he said. He clipped her into his arms. She turned her head away. He forced it up with his right hand. He kissed her by force on the lips. She struggled, then didn't struggle.

He let her go abruptly. "Digby!" she muttered. "Have you gone crazy?"

"You'd better fix your face," he said. "And I shall take a bath to remove my odour. See you later." He took his glass with him. He felt miles and miles better, and very much astonished with himself.

"You'll have to go to the club for dinner," she called after him. "I let Olaf and Helmut go out. Or you could cook yourself an egg."

He stopped. "Why did you let them go out?"

"Why? . . . Why?" In ten years of married life he had never spoken unkindly to her, far less criticised her management of their household. "Don't they have to have time off? Aren't they people too? You come back from your silly fishing trip without warning . . ."

"You had plenty of warning," he interrupted coldly. "You could have made some arrangement. It's your only job, after all." The door bell rang. "There's the little author. You'd better let him in." Digby stalked through their bedroom into his dressing-room into his bathroom and shut the door. The water gushed. . . . Oh God, he thought with horrible clarity. What have I done now? I told her it was her only job. I told Madeleine she was a housewife. Oh, my God! She'll never forgive me for that.

Digby waited up for her. It was nine-thirty, ten, ten forty-two, still too early. He had tried the *New Yorker*—no good. He had worked at the Boston speech—no good. He had prowled out of his library into the drawing-room which was perfect Louis Seize—or some such period, quite perfect and quite unlivable in, unsittable in, and the hollow from his dirty self was larger than Madeleine's hollow at the other end of the sofa or whatever it was she insisted on calling it—no good. Oh, hell. Back to the library and just one more Bourbon and water to pass the time to make it easier to say: *Madeleine: I can't tell you how sorry I am.* Bourbon—no good. He had tried the *Wall Street Journal*—no good. Throw it away and pick it up and fold it extra neatly to make amends for being naughty like a kid chucking things around.

He had called Arthur Perkins, but Arthur was not back from the ball-game. He had taken a last one, a very thin one, too thin; he made it tastable. Then he remembered the book which, by a whim and for something to look at in the plane—and it had been too bumpy—he had put that morning in his grip. How boring. How Godawful dull. You mustn't say God all the time. Nanny said at Nantucket: *Now, Digby, if I hear you take the Lord's name in vain just the once more, I'll take the back of a brush to the place provided with your breeks down, seven years of age or not.* Oh God, she was Scotch too.

He found the passage in *Highland Days. It has long been the pre-occupation and ambition of Highland sportsmen to kill a salmon in the river, to shoot a grouse upon the hill, to stalk a stag in the deer forest—to achieve these three several and separate feats within the compass of one day. This laudable aim of every would-be Nimrod is less easy of realisation than might at first be supposed. True, the grouse is no rare prize. True, a*

shootable beast is likely to be in the corrie. True, the salmon may be running fresh from the sea. But to account for the one and the other and the third between a single dawn and a single dusk—there, in the words of the poet—there's the rub. Still, it is safe to say that any Highland Laird of determination and skill (and indeed they are a skilful and determined breed of men) can in the fulness of time achieve this feat, this hat-trick of the hunter. How is one best to try? There's the fascination. Should he begin at the river, continue to the moor, and finish in the high forest? Six ways it can be done. Six are the permutations and combinations of three. . . . But if the hat-trick is comparatively unusual, the double hat-trick is indeed a rare triumph of the chase—two salmon, a brace of grouse, two stags.

What kind of pompous language was that? But it was interesting, wasn't it. It would be a strangely fascinating idea to discuss beforehand with the wise old Ghillie. *Now, Angus. How shall we try to-day? What is your advice? The stag first? Last?* And off he went.

Steady, he said to himself. Steady, Digby! All his life he had built castles of the mind: he would be a bold hero—rescuing maidens, capturing thieves, accepting surrenders, braving fire and flood. Nobody, not even Madeleine knew of these romantic fancies. They remained hidden in the prosaical competent Digby who did fly to and from his fishing camp, but otherwise led the dullest and safest of lives.

Of late, his dreams had not come—which might be yet another segment in the spinning growing multitudinous circle of despair. But now that he had been rude to his wife and was awaiting his just deserts; now, unaccountably he went on a journey to the land of kilted nimrods, the land of purple heather, the land where grown-up people said *hoots toots mon* as if that was the most ordinary thing to say, the land where everyone was wise and pawky, the land of bluebells and bonnie lassies, the land of his sturdy unknown ancestors, the land of the hat-trick, of the double hat-trick. Bang—bang on the moor; bang—bang in the corrie, whatever a corrie might be; strike, strike, and two silver salmon grassed.

He came abruptly out of his reverie as the key slicked into the yale lock. It was eleven thirty-six. The bottle was half empty. Heavens, he hadn't meant to take that much; and no effect whatsoever. He put it in the bar cabinet. He was morose. He was going

to make a manly simple apology to Madeleine. A pause, and then the key turned. It might be Olaf and Helmut.

"When shall we get together again?" Get together, indeed!

"Call me, why don't you, Craig?"

"Good night, Madeleine."

"Good night, Craig."

Digby stepped out of the library. He was wearing the velvet smoking-jacket she said made him look so distinguished. "So you got back, darling."

"Yes." No Digby; no darling. She did not look at him. She tidied the papers on the hall table, then turned to their bedroom door.

He wanted to say: *I'm sorry, Madeleine. Please will you help me snap out of this thing, whatever it is.* But how could he say that when he saw the cold indifference; when, after ten years, he had no more idea than at the beginning what went on in her head, less probably; when he had never demanded anything in their married life, but had given in to her, comforted her, spoilt her—what was the word, cosseted her. All give and no take—which was a form of selfishness too. Now he knew with certainty that it was too late for her to give, to understand, to help him. But he had an apology to make.

"Darling," he said. "Can you come in the library just a minute? I want to say . . ."

"It's almost midnight. If you're going to tell me you're sorry, there's no need." She turned the door handle.

"Please, Madeleine. I don't often ask."

"Oh no," she said. "You never ask. You're much too perfect." But she came into the library.

"How was the party?"

"It was all right."

"Anybody interesting?"

"Yes. You wouldn't know most of them. Oh, and the Mannings were there of all unlikely people."

Tim Manning was Digby's personnel vice-president. He wasn't a bad guy. He lacked decision. His wife was terrible.

"I'm very sorry for saying that about Olaf and Helmut, darling. I don't know what's got into me lately. Something just seemed to snap."

"I don't mind so much you being as cross as a bear or behaving like a little boy," Madeleine said. "I don't mind that so much. But when you say *it's my only job after all*, to cook your supper, when I think of how I've struggled all these years to make your home, when I think of how I stay in New York in the heat of summer, when I think of everything I've done for you and do for you and give up for you and the full life of my own I deny myself, and then you make out it's my duty to be a sort of slave for your comfort, and your pleasure if you feel like it."

"Please forgive me for being rude," he said. "I never meant it, and it won't happen again."

"Then you attack me like a wild beast!"

But he was not sorry about that. Oh no, no. That was altogether different; a great pity he hadn't been beastly long ago. Steady! The tickle in his head was starting again.

"I've been thinking, Madeleine," he said hastily. "I've been thinking that I must take a real vacation this year." He hurried to tell her his startling idea of twenty minutes ago before it palled into a ridiculous notion. "You remember I've spoken of my father's cousin, Mona Ross, who married a man called Galbraith in some English Army outfit in India. Well, he had a country place in Scotland where they went back to live and she's dead, of course, but he's alive the last I heard, and I've been thinking it's no good my taking a vacation on this side with the usual gang and within reach of the office. What I need is a real change, and you're tired too, darling, so what I'm saying is, why not cable this Galbraith guy and ask if he can put us up for a few days, and we might take one of the cars with us and drive around the country. We could spend the whole of August together. August would be best." Digby realised that this jumbled waterfall of words was utterly unlike his usual measured delivery.

Madeleine stared at him in astonishment. "Scotland!" she said. "Why, that's a barbarous country. I believe the food is even worse than England—bannocks and haggis and porridge, and those self-righteous prigs of people. Now Europe would be different, not this year but next perhaps. I would so love to see Rome again, and eat French omelettes and food and drink Chablis and go to Salzburg to

the Festival. But Scotland!" She looked at Digby with genuine horror.

"Edinburgh has a Festival now too," said Digby. "Scotland is such a beautiful country everyone says." He did want to persuade Madeleine. "The home of Walter Scott and Burns and John MacNab!"

"The one wrote the dullest novels, and the second was only a lustful ploughman. I've no idea who the third was."

"He was a famous Buchan character," said Digby with mounting resentment. "And why shouldn't a lustful ploughman be a poet, if I may ask?"

"You may ask, and he can try. I'm sorry, Digby, I wouldn't dream of going to Scotland."

Madeleine smiled. She had not forgiven him and she would not forgive him. "I'm going to bed."

"I shall go alone in that case," Digby said. Decisions had never been difficult for him. He made this fateful one very easily.

She turned at the door. "Why go alone?" she said softly, viciously.

What was this?

"Why go alone?" Madeleine repeated. "Why not take Miss Prendergast?"

"*Miss Prendergast?* But I have no business interests over there. What would I want Miss Prendergast for?"

"That was what I wondered when I heard this evening about the brooch you gave her from Cartier's. Emeralds and diamonds, wasn't it? What a charming present to give a secretary. What a lucky secretary! It's the joke of the office, Elise says. They wonder why you were so obvious about it."

"Wait, Madeleine! I can explain." He hated all scheming gossiping vengeful women—Madeleine, Miss Prendergast, Elise Manning, the whole lot of them. "Not that there's anything to explain. I was unpardonably rude to Miss Prendergast the other morning. So I bought her the booch, bought her the brooch." Damn! He went close to Madeleine. She retreated.

"A thousand dollars or so does seem a generous apology, particularly when Miss Prendergast is paid an enormous salary to endure

your little outbursts. That's her job, isn't it? That's my job too—unpaid—as you said earlier this evening."

"It wasn't anything like a thousand," Digby said. "Besides Miss Prendergast gives me most devoted exemplary service. She never nags me, never complains. She is whole-heartedly jobbed up in her wrap." Dear God, he thought. What's happening now? But he was too angry and too proud to correct himself.

Madeleine smiled sweetly. "Ermine, I suppose. I can't say I admire your taste, Digby. Of course, she may look better without her spectacles."

A vivid image of Miss Prendergast without spectacles crossed Digby's inner eye. "Are you crazy?" he said slowly. "Surely you know there's nothing whatsoever between Miss Prendergast and me." Why had he spent all that money on her? Why hadn't he realised she would show it off, and those women, all those damned women, would gossip, and some fool like Tim Manning would tell his bitch of a wife? I'll break Manning, he thought. *I'll break him.*

"I know nothing about you," Madeleine said. "All these years you pretend to be patient and everyone says dear Digby, so nice and kind, what a model husband, always perfect Digby, looking so sad when other people aren't perfect. Then suddenly you show your true colours. You make a laughing stock of me; you treat me like a slave; you assault me; you get drunk."

"I'm as sober as a lord," Digby said. But accountably and all of a sudden he was under the influence of drink for the first time since college days. Alcohol was storming at his tormented brain. Drunk as a judge. Warm as a cucumber. Leathery as a baby's bottom. He glared at his wife. "You're a spoilt, selfish, stupid little woman," he said clearly, losing the last vestiges of self-control. "Thank God you're not my secretary." He advanced upon Madeleine. He would show her. Yes, he would.

She fled across the hall, slammed the bedroom door in his face, locked it. Digby ran to the dressing-room, through that, just too late, the other key turned too. He shook the handle. "Let me in!" he hollered.

"You're a drunken beast," cried Madeleine from the other side.

"You've wrecked my life. I've seen it coming for a long time. Well, this is the end. I shall leave you to-morrow."

Digby's house had toppled. The world and a wife may view the peccadilloes of a sinner with indulgence. But to a paragon who shows feet of clay, the world and a wife are merciless.

He lay in the narrow bed in his dressing-room. How could he face the morrow? How could he endure those leers in the office? What was this evil streak which, just now, a little ago, had made him want to beat his wife, to hurt her? Poor Madeleine! Poor plain Miss Prendergast who meant nothing to him, never had and never would. Poor me! he thought. Poor sodden wreck. Another one who couldn't take it. He drifted into fume-ridden sleep.

Once more by that vicious trick of the subconscious, his dull secretary was changed to a creature of delight. She sparkled in gems and nothing else. A salmon hung by the gills from one hand; she held a grouse in the other; she stood beside the corpse of a noble stag. *The hat-trick:* she said. *Oh. Mr. Ross!*

CHAPTER THREE

ANGER LEADS to insult, and insult to a locked door which leads nowhere good. But in the case of Digby Ross a locked door did lead him to adventure.

He was a whole-hearted man, and he set about the preparations for his vacation with fanatical efficiency. He cabled Colonel Galbraith, received an answer, shipped the Cadillac, startled his board of directors, briefed the executive Vice-President, booked air-passage, delivered the Boston speech, and did many other things with the assistance of Miss Prendergast.

If the brooch was still an office jest, no one smiled about it in Digby's presence. From being an amiable and competent executive secretly afflicted with melancholy, he changed overnight into a cold courteous tyrant. At the age of forty-one he made a startling discovery —that he did not gave a damn what anyone thought of him, always excepting Madeleine. He wrote her at Bar Harbor, a simple letter of regret and apology; but when a week passed and she had not answered, he dismissed her also from his mind—or he succeeded in doing so in the driving torrent of each day's work.

The first columnist was Dudley Lubert. Rhetorical questions were his method, a thoroughly tiresome one. He asked if gifts outside the family were the cause of a rift between the Construction tycoon and his poetic lady, so long held out as models of domestic bliss. No breath of scandal had ever been whispered about the Rosses before, but Digby took even this in his stride. He made a point of appearing at the club for lunch that same day—calm, urbane, reserved.

He also sent for Tom Manning. "I understand you have been spreading malicious gossip about me," he said without preliminaries

to that startled gentleman. "To be specific, I understand you told your wife that I had given my secretary an expensive brooch, and you said, with slanderous implications, that it was a good joke in the office. Did you?"

"Why, Digby," Manning stammered. "Why, if I ever mentioned such a thing I certainly didn't intend . . ."

"Listen to me," said the new Digby. "I will not tolerate disloyalty at any level in our organisation. I made you personnel Vice-President last year. I have not been satisfied with your work. I am less satisfied now. Unless there is a most noticeable improvement, I shall break you without the slightest compunction. Thanks for coming in."

Mr. Manning tottered from the office.

Old Randall Johnson the Chairman, came to see him. "Well, young man," he said. He had been a friend of Digby's father. "I hear you've been making things hum around here; I hear pretty well everybody's nursing an ulcer. What's got into you?"

"Nothing, Randall," said Digby. "There were a few things I wanted to straighten out before leaving for Europe."

"Have yourself a good time, then," said Randall. "If there's ever anything I can do, you only have to tell me. That Madeleine's a fine girl." It was none of his business. He could not say more.

"Thank you, sir." Digby looked out of his window on the last morning. "I do appreciate your saying that. I guess it's a thing we have to work out for ourselves." He did not now believe that they could work it out; and he had to admit that life was easier without Madeleine. He not only admitted it, he kept telling himself.

"I hope you enjoy Scotland. The only time I was there it never stopped raining. Well, my boy, forget all about us. You deserve a vacation if anyone ever did. I guess it's a good thing for all concerned before you burn the place up. Furthermore, I think it'll do you good to get right away on your own. You've been the blue-eyed boy living a sheltered life since the day you were born." Typical of old Randall, and Digby took it from him.

Lastly Miss Prendergast, wilted with overwork and summer heat. I ought to say I'm sorry for driving her so hard, Digby thought. But he said nothing of the kind.

" Your air-ticket, Mr. Ross. Your passport. The travellers cheques. The automobile forms. The heavy baggage receipts. The grocery invoices from Charles's. The customs clearance receipts. The International driving licence. The Cadillac will be waiting at Prestwick airport to-morrow morning. I think that's everything." She stared across the table at Digby sadly behind her spectacles like an office mother. " Do be careful at first about driving on the wrong side of the road, and I hope you have a lovely time, Mr. Ross." Lovely! he thought sourly. Lovely's her human word. She's wearing her lovely brooch.

" When does your own vacation start? "

" Next week, Mr. Ross. I'm going with friends. We plan to drive through Maine and . . ."

He did not hear the itinerary. What kind of friends? He was wondering. Men friends or women friends? But she had come to the end of her journey.

" I hope you have a wonderful time," Digby said gravely; and had a thought: " If I send you a postcard from Scotland, will they forward it on from here? "

" Oh yes, Mr. Ross." She was delighted. " I'll tell them."

Miss Prendergast, Ross Corporation, New York City. Miss What Prendergast? Think of not knowing her name after all this time. She always signed her little typed notes with a plain P. He would have been ashamed before, and have found out from somebody else. Now he did not care. " What's your first name so it'll be sure to reach you? "

Miss Prendergast blushed all over down to the visible limit of her neck. Her eyelids drooped hugely grotesquely coyly behind thick lenses. It was rather sweet and touching. " Frances," she said. " Frances Amelia Prendergast, Mr. Ross."

" Frances is a very pretty name," Digby said. He knew that this ordinary remark would become another of her sacred possessions; he was well aware that Miss Prendergast was abjectly in love with him. He had an absurd quixotic impulse to break yet another canon of his life and give her a kiss right here in the office. Quixotry or cruelty? He decided against it.

" Au revoir then, Miss Prendergast. You are a great strength

and comfort to me." It's just as well she doesn't know about some of those dreams.

" Good-bye, Mr. Ross. Thank you more than I can say." They shook hands, although he would see her again on his way out now in a minute. Her nice legs were a pleasure to him; any woman's nice legs were a pleasure to any nasty man.

They flew east in the evening to a twilit Gander, down and into that apotheosis of station waiting-rooms, where people sit in dim rows on imitation leather, metallic voices summon, the Cabinet Minister is another airborne sheep, the barman shakes good cocktails at three a.m. before the evening meal, lordly captains stalk past at the head of crews, babies cry importunately, great planes roar without, and there he is at last reaching for the microphone—but not our flight. Gander, the unforgettable oasis that nobody loves.

There were stars and a chilly wind, no moon. Digby followed all the others to the plane. She was not a mere plane like the Bonanza or the Grumman, or even a homely D.C.3. She was enormously silent and powerful on double wheels, lights gleaming, tanks lapping abrim you could imagine, and the captain's square face far away up front looking out of his window, ready to take her, to cajole her, to pamper his giant mistress of the ocean air.

Now inside, the steward smiling and the stewardess smiling. " On our way again, Mr. Ross," said the former and Digby knew he was a favourite passenger, which was warming in the warm after-cabin.

He had flown many thousand miles in air liners such as this, but always on business, or almost always—and he would busy himself in his demanding brief-case. This time it was different. This time the propellers, the giant engines, the whole chariot and crew and Digby P. Ross were one and the same with common purpose.

Gander fell away. They climbed brightly in darkness to the east, less brightly as the cabin lights went out one by one, and chairs were tilted back. All were prisoners of the air, free to sit without seat belts, to smoke cigarettes, to go to the toilet, to attempt sleep.

Digby was wakeful. He looked out of his window at the ghostly wing, at the glowings of exhaust, at the touchable stars, at a dark

barrier which must be cloud ahead. He glanced at *Life* magazine. Life and wife. I see life, he thought, I lost my wife. This trick of mental rhyme was growing on him. He wondered about Madeleine. But in the first hour out of Gander, she and the Ross Corporation, the two main themes of his existence, both seemed utterly remote. He himself was not the one-time nice-guy Digby, nor the sad Digby of melancholia, nor the Digby who had finally blown his top, nor the cold Digby of these last days. He was an atom in a molecule high above the Atlantic.

"Is there anything I can get you, Mr. Ross?" It was the steward, wanting to help. "Coffee? Or cocoa? Or a whisky and soda?"

"Coffee, please," he said. He sat in his own small pool of light at the back. The cabin was dim. People slept. Digby sighed, not for the past or for the future, but for this moment.

Coffee came in a real cup. "How many crossings have you made?" he asked the steward, who seemed a nice fellow, not that you could tell if people were nice or nasty, not that people were nice or nasty just like that. Then he wondered if it was an unlucky question.

"This is my hundred and sixty-first," said the steward. He smiled, touching a pencil in his pocket. He was quiet. They always were rather quiet people. "And you, sir?"

"Six or seven," Digby said. "I can't remember. Where do you live in England?"

"Croydon, sir. That's west London. The wife and I have a nice house, bungalow type, and it's handy to school. We have two kids, a boy and a girl. You got any children, Mr. Ross?"

"No," said Digby, alone and intimate with the man. "I wish I had a son."

"Ah well, sir. Are you going over for long?"

"About a month. I'm visiting Scotland. It's the first real vacation I've taken in years."

"You'll be a busy man, Mr. Ross." The steward could tell the important ones a mile off. "Scotland! Now that's a place I never did feel comfortable like in. We were stationed there, flying in the war—Sunderlands, good old boats. Well, it's a nice enough country but the women are plain, and a grunt's a long speech, and the jokes

they try out on you are somethin' painful. I'd better not let Margaret hear me say that; she's Miss Aitken, our stewardess."

"She's not exactly plain," Digby said, feeling happy suddenly with this ordinary man from London who had crossed a hundred and sixty times, and had been in good old Sunderlands whatever they were during the war, and was happy.

"Margaret's the exception, sir. She's a looker is our Margaret. Maggie my Scotch Bluebell, I call her, which makes her mad. We've been mates a year now, Mr. Ross. Very happy together."

Happy together? Happy in the air with Margaret, happy in the bungalow with the wife and kids. Buddies, he must mean. Shipmates, and yet there would be an edge in it between a man and a pretty girl. It's a strange world. It's a strange big world I know nothing about except my own small corner and I know nothing about that. He looked out. There were no stars.

The steward was bending over Digby at their conversation. He did not see the girl, his mate, come down the cabin, which was droning, droning, a bump, a tiny air pocket miles above the Atlantic, or it could be anywhere any height over land or sea or around the moon.

She waited a little, a few seconds, then she gave the steward a slight spank, very free and easy the two of them with a favourite passenger in the middle of the night. "Move over, Tom. You're always getting your big self in my way."

Digby was happy, not being President of the Ross Corporation, but plain Digby, himself with them.

"Hallo, Maggie," said Tom the steward, moving over. "What's on your mind?"

"This," she said, holding an infant's bottle. "And they need coffee up front. You take it."

"Coffee, coffee, always coffee for the chauffeurs. Mr. Ross is going to stay in Scotland. I was telling him what a place."

"He says you're Scottish, Miss Aitken?"

"Yes," she said, and even in the dimness you could see her face brighten up thinking of Scotland or of some Scotsman or perhaps just thinking of being Scotch. "Were you ever there before, Mr. Ross?"

" My first time," Digby said. " I'm visiting in the Highlands."

" I have to do this," she said. " Then I'll come back. Or do you want to sleep? "

He shook his head. He didn't want to sleep. He wanted company, not to be alone thinking and regretting and dreading to-morrow. He was in a different mood every minute, sad again.

They both went away. Digby looked across, blackness to the north, then at the Emergency Exit handle. If I turned that, or pushed it, or whatever it is—you know what would happen? I would be sucked right out with the pressure and I would fall and fall and fall for ever, legs and arms thrashing toppling, good riddance, it's happened before. He shivered. He stared through his window at the stars again, at the paleness coming as they flew to meet the sun at three hundred miles an hour and an eighty-mile tail wind the captain said. Clouds below, that greyness, that billowing changing always the same carpet.

Here was Margaret Aitken, glancing at her charges as she came. People said they generally married some rich passenger in the end. She didn't look as if she wanted to marry anyone. She looked as if being a stewardess on the Atlantic run, a small risk but never knowing, and being kind to women and babies, and nice to the men too with the impersonal awareness of a good-looking woman who isn't having any but knows she is an airline asset, and having a perennial semi-platonic flirtation with Tom, her married buddy, was all she wanted out of life now for the present from day to day.

Digby half stood up. " It's very good of you to come and talk to me," he said.

" It isn't worth my while dozing," she said, but nicely. She sat down beside him and crossed her legs to the gangway. Madeleine would sit quite still like that too; oh, damn Madeleine.

" Where's your home? " he asked.

" Crail," she said. " It's a fishing town on the Fife coast. Just a wee place, but a Royal Burgh."

Crail! a beautiful name. In Crail, the Holy Grail. I wish I could stop it. " Would that be in the Highlands? "

She looked round at him and smiled, quite pitying. " Och no,"

she said. "Fife's the Lowlands. The Kingdom of Fife. You try asking a Fifer if he comes from the Highlands."

"I'm sorry," Digby said humbly. "I guess my geography isn't so hot."

"How would you know?" she said. "Living so far away." So far away from Crail in the Kingdom of Fife in Scotland in the centre of the universe.

"I'm going to Crummockshire," Digby said. "I hope to drive there to-morrow if my car's ready."

"What make of car is it?"

"A Cadillac. I had it shipped over to Glasgow."

"A Cadillac! Oooh!" said Miss Aitken enviously, not Scotch. "What colour? Does it open?"

"Yes, it's a convertible. Dark green."

"Do the windows go up and down with a button?"

"Yes," he said. He had a Cadillac, the finest piece of automotive machinery in the world, even if he didn't know Crail.

"I'm daft about American cars. I hope I see it at the airport."

"I'd like to show it to you," Digby said.

"It's a long run to Crummockshire, but a bonny drive except Glasgow. I doubt you won't get there till late. Stirling, Perth, Dunkeld, Pitlochry, Kinkilbo, Auchtermuchan, and so on. I was up that way last year on my holiday."

"I love to hear you speak," Digby said gravely. "Could you say those outlandish names for me again?"

Margaret Aitken said the names for him. Her heart fluttered, although Digby would never know that. "Do you have relations? Ross is a good Scots name."

"My people came from there," Digby said, "but the only connection now is that my cousin married a Scotsman. I've never met him. Perhaps I'm rather crazy to go." The dawn was golden, green, scarlet in the east, and clouds rolled on and on pinkly not far below, cold wonderful. Digby shivered. "My wife didn't want to come to Scotland," he told that smattering of it to the stewardess, Maggie the Scots Bluebell, who unaccountably was his shipmate. She looked at him, but only for a second. She stirred. She was bored, wanting to go away and pretend to have to get another baby's bottle, he

supposed. The elderly Jewish man in the seat in front had woken and was staring out. He had an ascetic Jew's face, suffering since the beginning. " What are the Highlanders like? " asked Digby because he was seeing Madeleine again.

" They're soft-spoken," she said. " And terrible ones to blether, as my Dad used to say. To talk, I mean. Just a bit too fancy for a plain Fifer. But you'll like them, Mr. Ross."

" The steward. What's his name? Tom something . . ."

" Tom Clifford, Mr. Ross. I'm Margaret Aitken."

" I know," he said. " Clifford told me a grunt was a long speech in Scotland."

" Och, Tom's a haver," said the stewardess, rhyming with waver.

" What's a haver? "

" A story-teller," she said. " Not quite, though."

Digby put up his hand to dowse the light. " It's beautiful," he said, seeing the land of cloud. In a minute now, any minute now, any second the sun would rise. But the sun kept on not rising.

" I hate it," she said. " It reminds me of everything."

He turned to look at her, composed and complete and strange to him. The fingers played a light touching game in her lap. Digby had thought that she and the steward were happy people in work together and at home separate and in everything seeing what it led to or not needing to care whether it led to anything. But she hated to be reminded. So there were no happy people. So it was impossible. Here was the sun. " I wonder if it'll be a good day," Digby said, wondering for him and for her and for everyone.

She stood up after the short time. It could have been half an hour in flight over the Atlantic when all things lie before and behind and all things are there. " I'll have to go," she said. " I hope everything is good for you, Mr. Ross," looking down at him, knowing somehow.

" Thanks," he said. " Thanks. Same to you," banal because he liked her so much and would never know if she had lost a man on some high morning, or she was wicked to her mother or the other secrets about her, but she would remain always a first picture of Scotland.

It was daylight. They flew on with muted thunder. Digby drew his curtains now for sleep when others woke. The small uneasy

nagging fell after point of no return. Three hours to go. Less than three, and every tappet, plug, wire, rod, line, piston, all the rest still in hot exquisite precision in the four engines, a miracle leading where?

He slept until they began the long slant. He ate bacon and an egg. He shaved with the airline shaver. Tom Clifford and Margaret Aitken were a steward and a stewardess, and he another passenger.

What were you doin' all that time with Digby P.? asked Tom earlier. *Did you give him the works, Maggie? Oh, shut up, Tom. . . . Sorry, Tom. I'm tired.*

Now bumping in the clouds, white, grey, dark, rain streaking on the window, half an hour, twenty minutes, well ahead of schedule, nearly due. Surely the land coming now. Surely. But it was the sea that broke first in wisping cloud, a rough sea, then land as the whine sounded for those wheels on spindly shanks to fall, to slow, to lock, the wing flaps whining too, a wet runway, and the hanging, the hanging, the touch of spurting tyres, nose falling, speed dwindling in a last reversible roar at Prestwick, Scotland.

CHAPTER FOUR

DIGBY DROVE in the afternoon by way of Perth, Dunkeld, Pitlochry, the names that Margaret Aitken had repeated to him—from a lush country ready for harvest, to a crossing of the dark River Tay, to a winding road in pines and spruce and larch above the Tummel, then into the real Highland country where heather was in bloom, and small sheep scuttled from the road, and men and girls on low-slung bicycles pedalled grimly uphill. As the steward had said, they were plain people—males knobbly, females flushed pink down the back of pudgy calves.

Digby had been reading books. He had expected houses of grey stone and white-washed cottages; he had expected the bareness and the glow of hill and valley; he had expected to hear a melodious bickering of grouse. But he was not prepared for immensity—for hills piled one on the other in every direction, an accumulation of small mountains making a vastness which he had never seen in the New England States.

The afternoon had turned fine, clouds were dark in sunlight, and Digby cruised North in his green Cadillac with the top down, passing crammed buses, toy cars, cyclists and more cyclists and explosive motor bikes. He wondered again about his host, about this Colonel Galbraith who was his cousin-in-law, and who had replied so strangely to Digby's lengthy, polite, diffident cable inviting himself for a few days yet making a refusal easy. The Colonel did not say he would be delighted or that he regretted deeply it was impossible. The cable stated: BRING VIRGINIA HAM SCOTCH WHISKY. GALBRAITH. Terse, explicit, but somewhat lacking in finesse, somewhat rude. What kind of a person could this be who did not express conventional

pleasure, but demanded a quid pro quo? Was this typical of Scottish hospitality? Did you pay board and lodging when you visited with your cousin's husband? And why whisky in the land of whisky? It rang a warning bell every time he thought about it. *They're out to plunder me;* they'll fleece me because I'm an American; they'll take what they can get and not say thank you.

Nevertheless, the Cadillac's capacious boot was full of ham, whisky and other good things. I shall hand over only a little at first, Digby thought wisely. Then, if this Galbraith turns out to be an intolerable miserly drunken old glutton, I can always take the rest elsewhere.

He drove along a valley through small grey towns, past hillsides lately stripped of lumber, past young plantations. Even the blackened tree-stumps row on row seemed neat to Digby's eye, but there was no neatness in the wild and sombre barrier of mountains where snow lingered in gullies on August the tenth after the height of summer.

He came to the signpost. TO GLENDROGAN ET AL. DANGER SHUT GATES PROCEED OWN PERIL.

Digby read this alarming notice several times. Dangerous to shut gates? Danger from wild animals? From kilted men with guns? A dangerously steep and twisty road? Surely that must be it!

He drove on slowly. The road was narrow but the surface good, for a mile or two it skirted pine woods, climbing out of the main valley where small fields of oats were still green.

Then round a shoulder, hooting carefully, into steep descent. As he went down Digby saw a different country altogether. Below him was a river, here black and smooth, there foaming brown over rock and boulder. It wound from side to side of the miniature valley which seemed to end abruptly in a hill-face a mile ahead.

But here was the first gate in a wall of loose grey stone. Digby got out to open it. He was confronted on the other side by a herd of the most ferocious cattle he had ever seen. Their coats were tremendously shaggy, horns menacingly wide and straight. Their eyes gleamed through hairy mantles with what seemed fanatical interest. They came closer. Bulls! he thought. Highland bulls! They could hardly be less, although the hirsuteness made that a matter of conjecture. He understood the danger notice. "Steady!"

he said to himself as he went back to the car. He drove through, and now these monstrous animals clustered round him. They stared with lowered heads, jaws not moving. "Oh, my God!" he muttered. Any moment they would charge the Cadillac and make mechanical mincemeat of it.

But Digby had courage. "Good bulls," he said soothingly. "Good moo-cows eating Scotch grass for supper" as he walked to the gate and clanged it shut, ready to leap over when the attack came. One mooed loudly, and the sound rolled round the narrow valley. That's the signal! he thought. Now they're going to charge! But he walked back for the good name of America, was safely in the driving seat, moved the lever to drive. Four of the creatures barred the road. "Shoo!" shouted Digby. He was pretty safe now. "Scram, you ugly bums!" using, in his relief, expressions quite alien to him. They paid no attention whatsoever. He inched his way forward to touch them, to push them gently, to push them harder. The car stalled. Tawny silent bulls surrounded him. One put out a slavery tongue to lick the mirror. There was only one thing to do. Digby sounded a long blast on the horn. One moment hairy monsters close on every side; the next a rampaging stampede. They took off in every direction; a hoof clanged on the glossy flank of the Cadillac. "Oh, dear," Digby said. It was an ugly dent, a bad beginning. He wiped his brow, wondering what would be the next thing.

But nothing else happened and he came to the abrupt hill-face. There was a river junction and a bridge. One ancient signpost said Balgersho, and a road swung left along that river under the hill. The other and newer sign said Glendrogan. He followed the narrower, deeper, darker river to the right. At once he was in a gorge, desolate and forbidding, and the hillsides rose almost vertically—shale, rock, scant grass. Digby was sensitive to atmosphere. He felt instantly that there was murder in the air of this defile, that wickedness had happened and would happen under the cold eye of the eagle and the timorous eye of the deer. He stopped. It was beautiful. It was lonely. He heard a croaking. Far above him a dark bird swung—the raven, bird of ill-omen. He sighed. He wondered if he would love this grim country or hate it. He drove on again above the turbulent river, which in that moment was the river of his own troubles—

small to a godly eye, desperately close and deep. Am I here? he thought. If I am here, where am I?

The gorge ended as abruptly as it had begun. It widened to a glen between high hills. There was a second gate, then a third, no more cattle but black-faced sheep, and lambs already past an endearing infancy, still butting for their mother's milk. Blue hares lolloped across the heather, sat up on hindquarters to watch the car.

It could not be far now to Glendrogan. The time was six o'clock. Digby had seen no human being and no habitation in these last miles.

"Hey!" Was that a shout? "Hey!" again. He stopped. The two men were directly under him. One of them waved, then went on fishing. He was a short man in a kilt, bald and heavily moustached. His companion wore a bright-checked knickerbocker suit and hat. Both were again absorbed in the river. The bald one cast diagonally, and the fly made a small ringed splash in smooth water just short of the other bank. Both heads swung as one, both bodies bending forward, the bald man drew in slack, took one careful pace downstream, cast again and shot line. The tall man stalked the small man, and both stalked the river with a dedicated purpose which made you feel that they had been doing just this one thing since time began. They did not look again at Digby. He waited in the car. Was this Colonel Galbraith, his host? All he knew about the man was gleaned from a snapshot that Cousin Mona had once sent from India. She towered over a bald square husband beside a dead tiger. It was a very poor photograph. This man with the vivid complexion was square and bald. The other one, his long shadow, was bearded. Now the Colonel, if it was he, reeled in his line. Both turned and picked their way from rock to rock upstream again.

"That's the best of it," he called. "You Ross?" a peremptory bellow above the tumbling rush of water.

"Yes," Digby replied. He waited a long moment while the two of them climbed the bank.

"I'm Galbraith," said the Colonel, shaking hands vigorously. "I thought you must be him in that enormous barouche. The river's up a foot since this morning, but nothing doing. Well, how are you? How did you get on? Did you fly from America last night?"

"Yes," said Digby.

"How about that, MacLagan?" The Colonel turned on his companion. "What d'you think of that? Back home in God's country one evening, home on the range, and here the very next. Not bad going, eh?"

"It's a sign of the age, I'm thinking," remarked Mr. MacLagan. He was a portentously handsome man.

"This is MacLagan, my head stalker, ghillie, general *bête noire* and God knows what not. MacLagan, this is Mr. Ross. Digby P. isn't it, as you people like to be called. What does the P. stand for?"

"How d'you do, Mr. MacLagan," said Digby, escaping the Colonel's barrage. "This is fine country."

"It is so," said MacLagan, shaking hands. "Would Mr. Ross be making his first visit to the Highlands?"

"Yes," Digby said. It was his first visit, and a first meeting, a strange meeting—dark river, stark mountains, slick automobile, machine-gun Colonel, Highland patriarch, all in a brief unbelievable twenty-something hours from New York which he had not yet left behind.

"Let's get cracking, then," said the Colonel. "We might try the Piper's for a minute again on the way up. Hop in the back, MacLagan."

MacLagan seated himself with dignity in the back of the Cadillac. They drove up the wooded glen in silence until the Colonel said: "Here we are," at a pool below fast water. "Can you fish, Digby P.?"

Digby once had fished unsuccessfully for salmon on the Grand Cascapedia, but that was from a canoe and all he had caught were slinks. "I can try," he said, vastly surprised and excited at being given a chance right away immediately like this. "But I know nothing about salmon."

"That's a relief," said the Colonel. "You take him, MacLagan. I shall watch from this gilded chariot."

Digby went with his mentor to the water's edge. It was a small pool, dark and quiet; you could imagine salmon teeming in the depths.

"There's just the one chance at this height of water," MacLagan said. "See the swirl of yon rock?"

The swirl was in midstream, a break in the smoothness of surface, but the rock was submerged. "Yes."

"If there's a fish in the pool, that's where he'll be to-day. But a poor chance for Mr. Ross after the Colonel's been over the water. We'll try the Blue Charm."

Digby's heart began to thump. Suddenly he was all here, and no part of him remained in his native land. He was absolutely certain that there would be a salmon and he would hook it. He had often had such hunches before about other things and they had come to nothing, but this would come to something. He knew it.

He started above the rock. The big two-handed rod was stiff. He made some poor casts, but no tangle yet. "Enough line," said MacLagan. "Now take a step down at each cast. Mr. Ross is doing fine."

Digby was encouraged. He took one step, two, watching the line swing across above the rock into slack water. A third step, a fourth, and this time he could just see the fly skid through that tiny dip downstream of the rock. Nothing happened.

But at the sixth step something did happen. The line checked, was still for a moment; then it tightened. There was a mild tug. "What is it?" said Digby. Surely not a salmon.

"You're into a fish," said MacLagan. "Strike as soon as you feel him. Just firm."

Another tug. Digby raised the point of his rod, not quite believing. Then he believed. The line cut a spraying V across the pool, swung downstream, reel screaming, slack again.

"Take in," cried MacLagan.

Digby reeled in as fast as he was able. "Bravo!" It was the Colonel approaching.

The salmon made a second run. "Be easy on him," said MacLagan.

"Be firm," wheezed the Colonel. "Keep him in the pool."

"He'll no leave the pool."

"Yes, he will. Yes, he will. Keep the point of the rod up. Fight him!"

"Let him wear himself out," cried MacLagan. "Man, you'll break him. Be easy now."

This diametrically opposite advice from two experts confused Digby utterly. As a result, he was hard or easy on the fish according to the latest words of command. The last order before disaster came unfortunately from Colonel Galbraith: "Let the fish know who's master," he shouted.

Digby determined to be master. Just at that moment, the salmon jumped like a silvery bow three feet clean out of the water, corkscrewing for liberty.

"Point down!" shouted both men in agonised agreement.

But Digby was still being master. The line twanged, the salmon splashed, and all was limply silent.

"The Currnel aye knows best," said MacLagan with bitterness. "A twenty-pounder." He took the rod from Digby, reeled in and stumped off alone along the bank.

"Now he's in a huff," said the Colonel. "Bloody old idiot. You have to be firm on them, Digby P. I don't hold with this velvet glove nonsense. But *always* drop the point of your rod when a fish jumps. Well, never say die. Better luck next time. Now we'll go home." He raised his voice. "Come on, MacLagan!"

MacLagan muttered, but came. He seated himself once more in the back seat and stared fixedly across the glen. He was extraordinarily biblical and forbidding.

Digby had been kicked in the car by a Highland bull, had lost a salmon, had innocently caused a quarrel between master and man. If this darned old gasbag of a Colonel hadn't interfered . . . he thought, his sympathies entirely with MacLagan. But he did not feel disappointment. He felt vastly exhilarated. He breathed deeply. "Wonderful air you have," he said, driving along the narrow road.

"A bit chilly now," said the Colonel. "Of course I admit my blood's thin after twenty-two hot weathers in the plains."

What plains does he mean? Oh, the plains of India. They do get around, these people, Digby thought enviously, not knowing that he would soon be heartily sick of the plains of India. He pressed the button. The windows whined up.

"Jumping Jehohaphat," cried Colonel Galbraith. "Up go the windows at the pressing of a tit. The things starts itself, gears itself, winds itself, drives itself. Where is the Radar, that's what I want

to know? And the Death Ray? Is it atomic, this dreadnought, this road battleship, this New World monster?" He bounced gleefully on his seat and turned: "What d'you think of that, MacLagan?"

MacLagan did not give. "Hmmmm," he remarked.

"This is a good road," Digby said.

"Fair. Why wouldn't it be?"

"I expected something much worse after the notice back there at the highway."

"Oh, that! That's my dodge to keep the trippers out. There's a right of way you know but they're a perfect damned nuisance leaving the gates open and paper all over the place and bonfires and embracing in plain view, and this and that and the next thing. So I discourage them—one, by the notice; two, by Highland cattle. Did you encounter the creatures?"

"Yes," Digby said. "They barred the way. In fact I stalled the car against several of them."

"They stalled this Juggernaut? Impossible. Why, they're the most phlegmatic, amiable oxen imaginable, totally belying their appearance. They long to be patted and petted. What happened then?"

"I blew the horn, and they stampeded. One kicked the car on your side."

Colonel Galbraith peered over to look at the dent. He lay back and shook speechlessly with merriment while they drove further in the evening sunlight.

What an unattractive little man, Digby thought. With that absurd twitching vaudeville moustache! He had taken a dislike to Colonel Galbraith.

"Turn up here."

Digby turned into massive gates and along a drive flanked by rhododendrons. The moor rose steeply to the north, but down below it was green country of woods and fields. "Stop. This is MacLagan's mansion."

Digby drew up. "Home again," said the Colonel. "Time for a noggin. High time for your lemonade, MacLagan."

Digby got out and pulled forward his seat to let MacLagan disembark with the salmon rod, fishing bag and gaff. "Mr. Ross

did well," he said, inclining his head slightly and touching his hat. He did not look at his employer. " Good night, Mr. Ross."

Digby said good night. They drove yet further.

" MacLagan's a rabid teetotaller," said the Colonel, " and a conceited dogmatic old humbug into the bargain. But he knows his stuff, I must admit. I hope you can take your drink like a man, Digby P."

" I hope so," Digby said. Digby P.! Was that to be his fate?

They arrived at Glendrogan house. It was long and rambling, built of sandstone. It stood against a hill and faced south across the valley. Lawns, flowerbeds, pines, copper beech, croquet hoops, rock garden. They stopped in a swish of gravel. There was one other car, minute and ancient. " Ho, Ho," said Galbraith. " The Queen is with us. Come to sponge supper, I'll bet."

The front door opened. An exceedingly plain girl appeared. She bulged dumpily in kilt and sweater.

" Come and shake hands with Digby P.," commanded the Colonel. She obeyed, staring unwaveringly. " This is m'daughter, Elspeth."

" I'm delighted to meet you," Digby said with his infallible courtesy, and looked so. Inwardly he thought: Can they all be this plain?

The girl shook hands dumbly. She was the spitting image of the Colonel—but with a head of mousy hair, no moustache, no animation.

" Ah, and here's the Queen of the Highlands."

Digby had been about to say conventional things to Miss Galbraith when the word Queen for the second time struck into him. The Queen of England was Queen of the Highlands, wasn't she? Surely she wouldn't sponge supper? Still you never knew with these crazy people. Quite mad, he was thinking already. " I've asked you before not to call me that," said a contralto voice irritably.

Digby turned.

They were not all plain. He saw before him a girl, a woman, of unimaginable beauty. His romantic heart had sounded loud at the prospect of a salmon. At this prospect it beat a thunderous tattoo . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

DIGBY STARED. It was true, as old Randall Johnson had said yesterday morning in a different world, that his life had been sheltered. The fibre of his character had grown in an ordered inevitable atmosphere reminiscent of George Apley; he had never known, enjoyed or suffered the sweets of bloody wickedness. Not that Digby was a prude exactly. He had seen many women, and had been seen by many. Temptation had murmured a few times in his ear, but always the impeccable octopus code to say No, and always Madeleine near at hand, far more attractive than any other woman.

Now Madeleine was thousands of miles away, estranged from him; now he was in an alien land at the age of forty-one, far from the myriad shackles of decorum. Now, in short, he was ripe for temptation.

Temptation called—Digby answered. In the twinkling of an eye before he had even said how d'you do he was seized by passion.

The girl, the Queen of the Highlands as she did not like to be called, wore a kilt of gold and green and scarlet, the same colours as the dawn this morning. Her height was medium. Her hair was an unruly mane of auburn. Her face and neck and limbs were finely tanned. Her shoulders were broad, her hips curved slimly, her waist an isthmus. Her green sweater was a clarion call. At the extremities of long legs she wore golden socks and stout black brogues. At her throat, the visible apex of isosceles, was a great Highland brooch, a circle of silver fully four inches across, and in the centre of that a noble stag, standing broadside.

She stared back at Digby from green eyes, her nose tilted at the tip, her mouth wide, generous, full lipped. *Life!* she said silently. *LIFE IS LOVE.*

All this cyclone, this revelation, in a few seconds on deep gravel outside Glendrogan House in the County of Crummockshire, Scotland. The Colonel was speaking: "M'niece," he said. "M'sister's gel. Fiona Kilburnie of the Birks, Chief of Clan Kilburnie, Hereditary Keeper of the Royal Stags, etcetera, etcetera, in fact Mistress of all she surveys. Fiona, my poppet, this is Mr. Ross, Digby P. Ross of New York City, my dear wife's cousin once removed. The P.'s a secret, isn't it, Digby P.?"

Yes, the P. was a secret, damn the little man. They shook hands. Digby said none of the conventional things which came sincerely to his lips at ordinary meetings. He said nothing at all, nor did she. A thousand volts shot up his arm and stormed his system. Neither of them smiled. He knew with certainty, just as he had known down at the river that he would hook a salmon, he knew with certainty that this woman was for him.

"How did you come, Mr. Ross?" Her voice rose and fell over the few words.

I waited all my life to hear that music, that Highland song. "I came by plane," Digby said. How else would I come to lay my eyes on you? How else but on the magic carpet of the air?

"Did you have a good crossing?"

"Yes," he said. "It's wonderful flying to meet the dawn miles and miles up there above the clouds." *I hate it*, she said. *It reminds me of everything*. Who said? Maggie Aitken said.

"I believe you're quite a poetic sort of chap," said the Colonel. "A poet from the land of plumbing. Wonders will never cease. Well, come on in and let's have a peg. I hope you brought some whisky. We can hardly buy the stuff here because of dollars for the English."

"I did bring some," Digby said, feeling a little more kindly to the Colonel who thought him poetic; or a little less unkindly. "Shall I get a case out now?"

"No, no, young feller. Later will do. Come inside and find your room. Where did you put him, Elspeth?"

"The Blue Room," said Elspeth Galbraith. She seemed almost mute, but was sturdy. She swung two suitcases out of the back of the car and led the way into the house. Digby brought the others.

The Colonel carried the brief case. Fiona Kilburnie of the Birks did not carry anything.

"After you," Digby said. Languorous, lazy-limbed, indolently gliding. Oh, goodness gracious. Could such a vision be this Colonel's niece? He followed her into the hall.

It was a large and gloomy room, entirely dedicated to the chase. Ruffed stags with mighty antlers stared down from every wall, salmon in glass cases, stuffed birds, paintings of deer, pictures of wild duck and geese, a meticulously executed portrait of two dead grouse hanging by the legs from a string. Death was everywhere, and death vied with Fiona Kilburnie in sending long shivers down Digby's spine. Too much contrast too quickly. He went through the hall after the Colonel's daughter Elspeth, his second cousin, his blood relation, and along a cold stone passage, upstairs, another corridor, another. "Blue Room," she said finally, putting down suitcases. "Bath's at the other end." She nodded her head back the way they had come. Elspeth departed.

Digby was alone. Events, impressions, thoughts, stirrings piled confusedly upon him. He looked out of the window at a patch of heather; he observed a chilly jug and basin; he noticed the four-poster bed and awful wallpaper; he opened a suitcase and brushed his hair; he found the bathroom. Fiona, he thought desperately again and again. That's a swell name. Oh Fiona, Desdemona, Jonah. Rhymes no good. He stood once more at his window. It was incredible, but all the past was wiped clean on his slate. Madeleine was a petulant shadow; the Ross Corporation, what was the Ross Corporation? The friends of a lifetime? He could not remember a single one.

What's happened to me? I've only seen the girl for one minute. How old is she? Around thirty. It's absurd nonsense. I must take a grip. It's impossible.

Poor Digby at the cross-roads. But of course it was not impossible. It was altogether and completely possible as everyone with sense knows.

He went out, along, downstairs, along, round the corner, through the tangily dead-smelling crepuscular hall towards a room where the Colonel's voice and that voice sounded.

" I can always let it."

" My dear girl, you'll never let that great barn of a place, not on your life, not even to a rich Amer . . . oh, here's Digby P., clothed and in his right mind, and found the way first go off. It's a maze, this joint, but nothing to Fiona's palace, which reminds me of the time I was staying at the Viceroy's House in Delhi, that Lutyen's white elephant although some people say it's very fine. Well, I mistook left for right, or the west wing for the east wing. I tripped interminable miles along corridors and upstairs and finally into my door. What should I see but the Vicereine fast asleep in a pink night-gown in the middle of the morning. She did not stir, fortunately. Help yourself to a chota peg, Ross." The Colonel waved his hand at a tray of drinks.

Digby poured himself Scotch and soda, which might be a chota peg for all he knew.

He glanced once at Miss Kilburnie who reclined or lay in a deep armchair with whisky in her hand. She was watching him. No, he had not been mistaken. Queen of the Highlands, voluptuous Queen, unbearable. He looked away and sat down and pulled himself together. Elspeth was knitting a green sweater, knitting so fast that Digby could see the thing grow in a clicking of needles and a flying of blunt fingers. She stared unblinkingly at Fiona, who stared at Digby, who talked politely with the Colonel. After a while Elspeth arose, went over to Fiona, laid the embryo sweater across the back of her shoulders —it exactly matched the sweater she was wearing—returned to her chair and continued to knit until her father said: " Go and get dinner." She went out of the room.

At dinner. " Do you have deer in America, Mr. Ross? " So simply, so sweetly, so wisely, like *do you have people in America: Mr. Ross?*

" Why, yes," he said. " They're mostly in the woods, though. Not like your red deer. A bit smaller, I guess."

" And mooses? Huge things, aren't they? "

" Not many mooses now," he said. " Yes, huge things."

" I thought the plural was moose, like geese," said the Colonel.

" So it is," Digby said. He couldn't stand this sitting beside her, feeling his right side hot and electric. He ate practically nothing; out

of the corner of his eye he saw her tucking heartily into venison from cold storage, the Colonel explained. A lovely disturbing appetite of health and beauty.

"You eat like a horse, Fiona," said Galbraith.

"Don't be rude, Uncle Farquhar." Her eyes flashed. She was angry, and the anger passed like a summer cloud.

"Is your home near here?" Digby asked. He still did not know if she was Miss Kilburnie, or Lady or Duchess or Countess or Princess or what.

"Yes," pointing gracefully with her table knife across the valley to high hills in evening sunlight. "That's the beginning of Kilburnie land."

"Fifty thousand acres fit for nothing," Galbraith said. He sneered all over his purple face. He was outrageous.

"It's better'n yours, Uncle Farquhar," she snarled. "It's not just all plain bog."

"Fancy bog," said the awful Colonel. "Everybody finished? Let's go outside. Wash up, Elspeth. We shall need you for croquet later."

The three of them sat on a wooden seat beside the croquet lawn. Digby was tired. He listened to grouse calling on the hill behind. What a sound of wild untrammelled freedom. "It's a night for the wee people," Fiona breathed as quietly as a secret.

"Don't forget you're shooting with me the day after to-morrow, Fiona. Blank, blank, blank, Digby P.?"

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"Can you shoot?"

"Not well," he said.

"You're a modest chap. Said you couldn't fish, but you cast a fair line, not a bad line at all, in fact. I shall put you in the end butt. My invariable rule. Then you're less likely to kill somebody. I remember one time we were shooting Miss Jackson's Jheel near Delhi, and some Yankee tourist feller got wished on us. Know what he did? Shot his duck boy in the bare brown backside. Can you beat that? Ha, Ha, Ha!" The Colonel laughed immoderately with typical British callousness.

" Was the boy badly hurt? " Digby, humanist, made himself speak mildly.

The Colonel shrugged. " I dunno. They carted him off on a charpoy. We got 348 head that day, not bad going. I bet you never shot as many in America, Digby P."

" Our Game Conservation laws are strict," Digby said. " The daily limit is around six, I think, depending on the State."

" Six per gun? Good God! What a piddling little number."

" With us everybody hunts," he said severely. " Rich and poor."

" But can *everybody* afford horses? " Fiona turned great eyes full on him.

" Don't be dim-witted, Fiona my child. Surely even you know that ancient conker. He means shooting not fox-chasing."

The evening was still and the air heavy. A pigeon sat on an oak nearby. It's breast was pink in the late sun. Coo-cooo, Coo-cooo-coo, Coo, it cooed slumberously, then launched itself, climbed in a blatter of wings, hung, glided lovingly, and repeated the performance for some other pigeon's benefit. Fiona sighed. The Colonel puffed arrogant blue rings of cigar smoke one through the other through the next. Digby lit a cigarette because of the midges. They milled in small clouds, bite bite bite; he slapped his itching neck. They did not bother Fiona. Why not, for God's sake?

Elspeth arrived from washing-up.

" Croquet," said the Colonel. She went for mallets and balls. " Fiona, you and I will take the others on. I suppose you play, Digby P.? "

" Once upon a time," Digby said, remembering games on Long Island with his father who used to say it was good practice in self-control. How long ago can that be? Thirty years. Getting old. I did feel old; now it's wonderful how young I feel, as young as ever but no time to lose.

It was soon apparent why Colonel Galbraith had chosen Fiona for his partner. She played a brilliant swashbuckling game, a delight to watch. Digby and Elspeth dragged along behind. The Colonel hit his red ball almost through a hoop. He ran the flat of his mallet down the back, moving, yes indubitably moving the ball on. " Well, that's through all right," he said, made a roquet on Elspeth's ball,

took croquet and sent it over the edge, down the bank and into the rhododendrons. "You have to play from there," he remarked, running another hoop. "Local rule." Digby went down with Elspeth to find it and play back. "My father is completely dishonest," she said, making her longest speech of the evening.

The second game was nearly over when the sound of a light plane droned up; "Ah-hah," the Colonel said. "Hark to that! The bold bad baron, I'll wager."

It was a blue monoplane, flying very low in the valley, turning this way. "Who's that?" Digby asked. A plane was the last thing he expected to see at peaceful improbable acrimonious Glendrogan.

"It's that stinker, Balgersho," spat Fiona. Her brown cheeks wore fiery patches. She threw her mallet away and stood with hands on hips, shoulders square, bosom heaving mountainous defiance. She did not hold the pose long, however, for the plane rose to a stall, much as the pigeon had done earlier, hovered, then dived with roaring engine at the croquet lawn. They lay down. "Bloody young fool," screamed the Colonel afterwards, sitting up and shaking his fist.

The plane did not come again. It made a circuit, sideslipped steeply and landed in the field below. A man got out while the propeller was still windmilling, walked across the field, vaulted the wall in a swirl of kilt and bare thigh and loped up the slope towards them. He was loose-limbed, his walk a male version of Fiona's lithe gait, but it was a very male version. He had a mop of jet-black hair and pale eyes. He was devilish handsome in open khaki shirt and old tweed jacket.

"I've warned you a dozen times," hissed the Colonel, pale and mottled. "If you do that once more, Hamish, I'll shoot you down, I swear I will."

"I'm sorry, Colonel. Won't happen again, but I couldn't resist it when I spotted the Chieftain herself. How are you, Queenie?" He pinched Fiona's cheek, whereupon she slapped him tempestuously. He fingered a reddening jaw. "Just the same old Eve, I see. Hallo, Elspeth. And who's this?"

"This is Digby P. Ross, my American cousin-in-law, just arrived to-day—Lord Balgersho."

" I'm delighted to meet you." He smiled with grace and charm. " Welcome to the Highlands."

Digby was pleased. " Do you fly a lot? "

" Whenever I can get juice. I picked up that old crate from war surplus. She's prettty well had it."

" Hamish is our local hero," said the Colonel. " He shot down God knows how many Boche planes in the war. How many was it, Hamish? "

" Fifty-two, some of those were sitting ducks, some weren't. Elspeth, may I get myself a glass of milk? "

Elspeth mumbled and went with him into the house.

" His morals may not be all that," the Colonel said. " But Hamish is tough. You should see him on the hill. Oh, you will of course day after to-morrow. D.S.O. and two bars, D.F.C. and two bars. They say he was the best fighter pilot we had. And I'll tell you an extraordinary thing about him, Digby P.—he never touches a drop of alcohol, says he can't understand why anyone drinks the stuff. He's a remarkable young chap." Hero-worship from the Colonel.

" He's a remarkable crook," Fiona said bitterly. " Like every other cursed Tarr of Balgersho aye was."

" Your speech suffers under ancient passions, m'dear."

" If he does anything to spoil the Gathering," she growled, " I'll kill him, I mean it. Now I'm going home. Thanks for dinner, Uncle Farquhar." She turned and strode in the direction of the front door.

Oh, no! Impossible! Please don't leave me! " What is the Gathering? " Digby asked to gain time, hurrying along beside her.

She stopped and faced him. " The Gathering of Clan Kilburnie," she said, touching her great brooch. " Our mid-century Gathering. From the four corners of the earth my clansmen will come to pay me homage—from England and America and Australia and Canada and New Zealand and South Africa and the Argentine and those places and Scotland too of course." She said the list dreamily with her eyes veiled. " That'll be a braw day—massed pipers, dancing, games, the marching of the Clan."

" I bet it'll be wonderful," Digby said. He could see the Pilgrims in his mind's eye, each bearing the stamp of a far exile, each bending the knee to his Chieftain, his Queen, his Highland goddess.

"You can come," she said simply, staring at him. "Saturday week." They walked across the gravel to her car. He held open the door.

"What make is it?" he asked, stalling again.

"An Austin Seven 1929 model." And she added: "You're the nicest American I've met, Mr. Ross."

"I wish you'd call me Digby," he said, voice cracking.

"Och, yes," she murmured. "Aechi-va, Digby. That means good night, Digby, in Gaelic." She rested an exquisite hand on his. She pressed the starter button. There was a click, but nothing happened. "Could you give me a wee push?"

Digby gave her a wee push to the beginning of the hill. The engine caught. She waved.

As the midget vehicle chugged away, Elspeth arrived, churning up gravel. "Just my luck," she panted, the green sweater in her hand. "Ready to try on for bust."

Digby shivered.

But here were the Colonel and Lord Balgersho. "I say, what a wizard car," said the latter. "Yours, I suppose, old boy." He at once sat himself behind the wheel and fiddled. "I'd like to drive it sometime."

"Why, of course," Digby said, but he wished he had not brought the Cadillac. It stole his modest thunder. Except with Fiona, who hadn't even noticed it. She said: *you're the nicest American I've met. Aechi-va, Digby.*

Then he remembered the provisions in the trunk. He removed three wooden boxes and closed it again. "A ham and a few groceries in this," he said to Elspeth. "I hope you can use them." And to the Colonel: "Some Scotch whisky and our Bourbon. I thought perhaps you would like to try it, sir."

"Would I not! Here, take these in, Elspeth. We have a motor-house if you want to put the car away, Digby P., my bountiful friend."

"I'll show you," said Balgersho. "It's on my way. Mind if I drive?"

"Do," Digby said, sitting beside him.

Balgersho drove down through shrubberies in the gloaming. He

was one of those people to whom strange cars and automatic drives are known by instinct, seem to be known too uncannily well. They left the car in the garage.

"I'd better be quick," Balgersho said; but they strolled towards the field where a sheen of after-light showed on the wing of the plane. "What do you think of Fiona?"

What do I think of her? Wonderful, superb, marvellous, epitome of womanhood, splendid, elemental? "I think she's quite attractive," Digby said. He didn't trust this guy an inch, but he liked him.

"Utterly dumb and supremely bedworthy," said Balgersho. "You know why she hates my guts, don't you?"

Plenty of reasons. "Is it some old feud?"

"You must have come through the Bloody Pass to-day. In August 1550 or some such date, the Kilburnies had been stealing our sheep and poaching our deer, so we lay up there and taught them a lesson. Rough times, rough justice. Served them right."

"I knew that," Digby said. "I felt it the moment I entered the pass. I felt the past and the future too."

Balgersho looked at him. "Odd," he said. "Very odd," and seemed to think about that. "Well, Fiona is a professional Highlander —Pipers, Gatherings, loyal clansmen, tame stags for the Monarch, second-sight, pixies, and all the rest of that bloody humbug; and such a moron that she thinks her ancestors stand by her side nursing grudges like so many elephants. A hopeless woman, but I must admit she arouses the beast in me. Does she in you, or am I mistaken?" He smiled. He was wicked. You could feel the energy bursting out of him. No wonder he got along on milk.

"She didn't strike me as being moronic," Digby said rather stiffly.

"She will," said Balgersho. "She will." They had reached the plane. It was dusk. He opened the door, peered at the switches, went round, turned the prop twice and stopped with his hand on the blade as if a thought had struck him. It had. "I say, old boy," he said. "I wonder if you could spare me a fiver for a few days. I'm temporarily out." No diffidence, no reason given.

A fiver? Five pounds that was. *Never lend money*, father used to say. *The more dollars you lend, the more dislike you earn, and the less you get back. Better to give it.* Which had been Digby's rule as is the

way often with a father's precepts. Pounds. You couldn't say: *Here, take five pounds. I don't want it back.* Not to these people. They had their famous pride, and you respected the fiction and lent the cash. But this fellow was a war-hero, after all, wasn't he? "Why, certainly," Digby said. He selected a crinkly five-pound note.

"Many thanks." Balgersho switched on and swung the prop in earnest. The engine puttered, "I'd better get cracking. No lights. Good night then. Don't let Galbraith browbeat you. He's a frightful old thug." The plane taxied with a few bursts to the end of the field, turned and took off at once. She climbed slowly and darkly against the western glow, then swung round towards that pass, the Bloody Gorge of infamous memory, of infamous portent.

Digby walked up to the house. The longest day of his life was over. A multifarious kaleidoscope—of high dawn, of Maggie the Scots Bluebell, of a rude Glasgow policeman, of Highland Bulls, of discord at the Salmon Pool, of that fine old chap MacLagan, of his garrulous host, of Elspeth the Dogsbody, of the bold bad Baron Balgersho who lived four miles away, and used his plane as most people use cars. These thoughts flitted through his mind while bats flitted overhead in twilight, the wayward dark hunters. Bats, people, things—all shadows. But his vision of Fiona Kilburnie of the Birks, Chief of Clan Kilburnie, Hereditary Keeper of the Royal Stags was no shadow. Her imperious splendour was more than a temptation; it was a dazzling summons. Suddenly, improbably and shamefully, he heard Jake Doon's words: *We was shacked up the whole month.* He crunched into the front door.

"That you, Digby P.?" called the Colonel. "Come and have some *pina-ka-cheese*: a night-cap, I mean."

Digby went in to drink his own whisky and to listen about India.

CHAPTER SIX

THE ELEVENTH OF AUGUST was a day of waiting. Digby listened to the Colonel's stories; walked with him to see lilies and rock garden; went with MacLagan to try for a fish. (*Mr. MacLagan*, he said casually. *Have you ever done the hat-trick?—I do not understand what Mr. Ross is meaning.—Got a deer and a grouse and a salmon in one day, I mean?—I would not be after wasting my time over such an ambeetion. Now Lord Balgersho, His Lordship is aye upt o daft tricks like yon.* Disapproval.) Wandered a short way up the hill; stared many times across to the beginnings of Kilburnie land, to a far grey tower which was a corner of Fiona's castle, to the narrow ribbon of road along which her car would come and did not come. (Aechi-va, Digby, with that soft dry pre-expectorant 'ch' wholly beyond the compass of his own larynx); thought once or twice guiltily of Madeleine (*You're a drunken beast*—how different!); tried to be nice to Elspeth (*It's done:* she said with a trace of animation after dinner. *I say, Digby P.*, remarked the Colonel. *I wish you'd get a crush on me and knit a sweater.*)

It was a day of fevered impatience, of conscience told to get the hell out of here, of mounting eagerness, of frustration. But Digby's late sadness had vanished altogether. He lived now for the future.

They walked all morning on the twelfth. It was extremely hot; thunder muttered; the haze thickened, dulling bright heather. Digby had felt on his first evening and second day that he was a stranger in a dreamland of ultimate plainness, beauty, discord, far from this planet. Even with Fiona he felt this. But not to-day as he climbed on and on through deep old heather, through dark burnt patches scrabbling on boots, over green young heather, and here a covey exploded before him and he missed both barrels but Fiona downed

two, downed a brace, and a relief to mop his brow while MacLagan's black Labrador retrieved the birds. Then it was hill grass for a way beside a loch where rushes grew, and the rising trout ringed and spread, ringed and spread on mirror water. Then bog again, damned floundering bog which you could not skirt because of the discipline of line. A snipe rose, grated, zigzagged away over wild cotton, and you got him; you actually got him. " Good shot," said Fiona. Oh, wonderful words. Her face was flushed and her forehead wet. To-day she wore a jacket with her kilt. To-day she was in her mountain element. To-day nobody made jokes or squabbled or said unkind things. To-day they were deadly serious on the job, and Digby was one of them, was not doing badly.

The line swung at last along a wall on high ground, swung again back south where thunderheads massed black beyond the valley and above Kilburnie, brooding. But here the sun still shone, grouse called, shots echoed, men were silent. Down the line a pointer froze, foreleg raised, tail out, trembling in ecstatic instinct. The Colonel put them up, shot one. Check again.

Fiona came to him with something in her hand. " White heather," she said. " The luck of the Highlands." She stood close to put it in his buttonhole. She was nature unadorned by powder puff or stick. She was the eagle and the thunder. Her home was on a heather hill. Supremely heatherworthy.

" Thank you," Digby said, and he lifted his lapel to sniff the faint astringent perfume of a pale green sprig with flowers of purest white, pretty and far more than pretty.

" Aah," she breathed, looking over his shoulder high. " Yonder's a shootable beast."

Digby turned. The stag was silhouetted against blue sky, motionless upon a crag, antlers wide, as if staring from lofty freedom down at the Chieftain, its Royal Keeper. It stood in exactly the pose of the stag in Fiona's brooch, head turned to watch, to taste the air. The antlers tossed once as if in salutation; the great beast strolled over the skyline, out of sight.

A well opened in the depths of Digby, a fountain gave him words: " I am the stag and I the Keeper. I the harvest, I the reaper." The fountain ceased to flow. Had he spoken?

" Digby," she murmured. " It was like a poem."

" What the hell are you two doing? " The Colonel's irate bellow shattered magic. Fiona moved into line, and they walked again. It was queer, that momentary interlude in a morning of sweat and toil, of dedicated killing. Digby was not a bloodthirsty man—even the gasps and flaps of an expiring fish caused him mild dismay. But here on the moors of Glendrogan, it seemed inevitably right that the strong dark birds should fly and die as countless generations of their ancestors had flown and died. It was a Roman ritual; he did his zealous best to be a Roman.

They came at one o'clock to the boathouse beside the loch, Digby was not hungry, but his thirst was something. Beer, he thought, gallons and barrels and oceans of beer. He permitted himself one bottle only, chilled in the clear loch water. The Colonel and Fiona took whisky. Elspeth and Hamish Balgersho drank ginger beer. They sat at the water's edge, munching Virginia ham sandwiches. Balgersho wiggled his bare toes. *Doesn't it hurt your feet?* Digby had asked that morning. *I've never worn shoes on the hill.*

" You did well, Digby P.," said the Colonel.

" That was a bonny shot at the snipe," Fiona lilted.

" Good show, old boy," said Balgersho in his Oxford accent.

Oh, it was a swell feeling to be home so far from home. They had accepted him. He was an honorary member of this ancient club. He loved them all in different ways, every one of them, even Elspeth a little bit. He sat between Fiona and Hamish, the bright kilt and the dark, the woollen stockinged legs and the bare legs, the auburn head and the black. They are the natural mates, he could not help thinking, and I in my hot weatherproof pants and long hunting boots, I should be the odd man out. Which was ridiculous, because even to-day a needle of animosity probed from Miss Kilburnie to Lord Balgersho. But Digby was fey. He was chopping and changing in his mood in and out and loving everything. Nobody would know that to look at him, and only a cunning person might guess that it was bliss for him to be so close to her long long legs and kilted hip and so on while she ate and drank, and the air was still, and thunder rumbled distant fury.

MacLagan came over, removed his hat, such feudal dignity.

" Twenty-seven and a half brace, four snipe, twelve hares, one blackcock," he reported.

" Well-grown," the Colonel said. " Hardly a cheeper among them."

" I doubt we're to get a storm," said MacLagan, looking south to blackness towering, reaching the sun, obscuring it just then, and the storm clouds jet black into brown. " Yonder come the beaters."

A party was approaching on the hill road—one tall man followed by a dozen smaller figures, all dressed alike as kilted Boy Scouts.

MacLagan turned to go, spoke first a grave encomium to Digby: " Mr. Ross did credit to himself." To *himself*; thus to America, thus to all men in their endeavours. It was the noblest of praise.

" The Reverend Lachlan McLean," said the Colonel. " Fledgling priest, patrol leader. The question is does he brave the elements to do the daily good turn or to see his lady-love? What do you say, Elspeth? What of your solitary holy swain? "

Elspeth's face, which had been pink from exertion, became crimson. She darted a look at the Colonel. Sometimes you wondered if she loved her father. He had been irascible but nice all morning; this was the first time his adam, his beastliness had popped out. Well, it was luncheon, a rest between business and business.

" Hallo, Padré," he called heartily. " Scouts will be Scouts, but I must say it's pretty sporting of you and your merry men to come with that storm brewing. This is Digby P. Ross from America—Mr. McLean."

The Minister was a lean and earnest young man, all knobbly bones and angles. Elspeth threw pebbles into the loch. The Boy Scouts lurked in heather. The first flashes began; thunder was louder and continuous.

The Colonel and MacLagan held consultation. " Is it worth waiting, or shall we try to get home with dry skins? "

" We wouldn't," said MacLagan. " The plout would catch us. Best the beaters shelter here, and the guns down at the Lum Rock. Syne, if it clears in time we'll do just the one drive and finish. The birds will be wild, I'm thinking."

" Okay," said the Colonel. " We'll have to hurry. Dougald, you stay with the beat. Hamish, you can drive us in the Landrover."

Dougald was gardener, chauffeur and general factotum, quite a sly-looking fellow. The Landrover was an English version of a jeep.

Balgersho drove fast and bumpily downhill to meet the storm. Greens, purples, greys, browns—all these shades of the moor darkened into murk, blended pale under lightning to a moonland, and the storm was a giant, crouching, towering, gathering to pounce and smother. The air stifled. "Leave the guns here," cried the Colonel as a first drop splashed the windshield, and they drew up.

They all scampered pell mell for the Lum, a spire or obelisk of rock, below it an open cavern, into that shelter of drip and slime and stalagmite as the plout, the cloudburst opened, volleys crashed, and heavenly shafts zigzagged to whimsical destruction.

It was shelter. Digby crouched beside Fiona in discomfort and in chill. A wild wind blew now outside. The tempest, the flat rain driving, a sudden monstrous hiss, blinding light, engulfing quaking world-ending blatter of Jove's bolt.

"Right on the Lum's nose," said the lackadaisical voice of Balgersho when it was diminuendo.

"What's a lum?" Digby asked.

"A lum's a chimney," Fiona said. "Lang may yer lums reek is what we say, Digby."

A lum, a chimney. Oh, it was a harsh thing that fate should do to him then in the storm's confusion. Fate brought him a vivid memory of a part of his honeymoon with Madcleine in an Adirondack cabin alone together during a storm such as this but warm before the log fire and the lum, the chimney. They heard the same terrifying hiss, and she came closer. *Oh darling Digby, my love. It's so wonderful to depend upon somebody utterly in storms and loving and everything.* Of all times to have such a memory to flee from.

"Stop it!" cried Fiona in the reverberating little grotto while thunder lessened. "Keep your hands to yourself."

"What's in a tickle?" said the mocking Balgersho voice beyond. He was that kind of wicked man and fighter pilot who is impelled to greater wickedness in storm and tumult.

There was a hiss, an indrawn human hiss this time. Digby turned his head. Elspeth stared at the nape of Balgersho's neck like a squat female goblin.

But treacherous memory, malevolence, storm were all forgotten in delight. Fiona came close to him for refuge. She touched him all up and down. She was shivering faintly, delectably. *Are you cold?* he was going to ask, but checked himself. He surrendered to guilty sensuous titillation while the storm passed overhead and dwindled.

" It'll be clear in five minutes," the Colonel said. That brought them back to the day's work.

" What happens next? " asked Digby. He remembered the Boy Scouts and the Minister. Nobody had explained their purpose.

" We're having one drive," his host explained. " I used to walk all day on the twelfth and keep driving for later, but I'm getting old and stiff now. So we drive half the day if we can find beaters. Only time for one this afternoon. We'll take the four butts nearest the road, and you'd better be on the left, Digby P. Whatever you do, don't shoot along the line." That hint of patronage, of schoolboys from overseas.

" You need have no anxiety," Digby said stiffly.

They went out. The southern sky was blue above Kilburnie, the air washed clean and cool, the steep land scoured by innumerable rivulets, sippling and gathering into streams and these to the burns and the burns in brown spate to the river to the sea. The beautiful cruel earth.

Fiona was on the right. Hers was the best butt. She was a superb shot, this also among her attributes. Elspeth stood with her, to worship and to mark the birds. Next Balgersho. Next the Colonel. And on the left Digby.

Far away, perhaps a mile, although hard to tell distance in this crystal air, the line of beaters was forming at the loch. Flags waved. Was that movement? Yes, they had started now as the sun shone again on myriad raindrops in the heather; and wonder of wonders, a rainbow curved down to strike upon a rock not fifty yards from Digby. He could see the splash of colours. Yes, quite absolutely certain. Didn't they say you never found the rainbow's end, that it lay always over the next rise? Or did they say that treasure lay buried below the rainbow's end? Which was another way of saying the same thing; or it would be in an ordinary land, but not in the paradise and fury of these Highlands. The rainbow vanished. I wish I could

have touched it, Digby thought. I wish I could have seen it on my hand. But he was supremely happy under discipline in the companionship of this day.

The first guttural GO-BAACK sounded. He could see the grouse flying low, dipping and rising over contoured land. They came towards Fiona. They milled and bunched and split, flying at great speed. Her shots sounded. Two birds crumpled, struck ground far behind, bounced. Balgersho fired both barrels, got one. The rest of the covey—was it eight or ten? too fast to count—passed through with swish, with mutter of wings.

So it went on. Digby missed four shots running; then he got a bird in front; then he missed five times, then he shot a miraculous right and left. " Good work, Ross! " called Galbraith.

The beaters were near now—men's figures and boys floundering. In the very centre, MacLagan himself, the bearded shepherd of his flock, cajoling them, " Steady now, Geordie, my wee laddie. It's not a race we're in. Come away then, Tam Duncan, you're doing fine. Steady on the right."

It was almost over. No birds could lie in that narrowing strip. Ah, but there were. The covey rose directly before Digby. As they took wing, every handkerchief waved on every stick, every beater's voice shouted in bass or shrill treble. It was tremendously exciting.

But Digby waited cool and collected. If the covey rose high enough, he could shoot safely, for the line of beaters was now a little below his level. Yes, they were rising. They climbed steeply to pass well over the butt. He took his first bird. The head dropped in the sure sign. At that moment the covey changed direction to his right. Still a safe angle for the next butt. He was not at all flurried. He swung into the lead for his second barrel.

It was then that fate played him a dreadful trick. Forefinger was already closing on trigger when the rubber sole of his right boot slipped on wet rock. He was in movement without support. The shot sounded loud accusation at him as he fell in a heap in the bottom of his butt. *Oh, God!* he thought. *Dear God!*

Silence as he got up. Not a beater's cry, not a grouse's call, nothing but the caress of fresh wind on heather.

" You bloody blank brass-bound blank of a blankety Yank."

He saw it all and heard it all sharply in horror—Colonel Galbraith holding both hands to the left side of his face, dancing and shouting; everyone running, Boy Scouts, Minister, Keepers, MacLagan, Balgersho, Fiona, Elspeth, all converging on the Colonel's butt. Digby ran too.

"I'm terribly sorry," he panted up.

"Let's have a look," said Balgersho, who had arrived at the same time. He pulled the Colonel's hands away and wiped the bloody cheek with his handkerchief. "Not so bad," he said coolly. "Three pellets. Nothing to make a fuss about, Colonel."

"Nothing to make a fuss about!" screamed the Colonel. "Nothing to make a fuss about when a homicidal maniac shoots me!"

"I'm terribly sorry," Digby said again. His wonderful day lay in ruins. His vacation was spoiled utterly at one stroke. He had committed the unforgivable crime. He could only be humble and go away. "I apologise, Colonel Galbraith. My right foot slipped on wet rock."

"Foot slipped indeed? What bunkum! And anyway didn't I tell you this morning that your blasted rubber-soled boots were no good on these hills? But would you listen to me? NO!" Blood poured down the Colonel's mottled cheek in three bright red trickles.

How could I have listened? Digby thought. How could I buy a new pair of size eleven high instep boots or shoes with nails at 9 a.m. in the back of beyond in this goddam country? He felt less humble, but he said it again with sincerity: "I'm sorry."

"You accept my hospitality; then you pepper me by way of thanks. You're a bloody menace, you Americans, the whole lot of you."

This was too much to take from any man. As Digby's anger rose, some devil reminded him of a small duck-boy who had been shot by an American beside a jheel, whatever that was, in India. And the American would certainly have paid for his hospitalisation and after care, but this English Colonel never even asked after the boy's welfare, only thought it was a good joke to tell against Americans afterwards in the presence of an American. Digby hated and loathed these

people, every one of them except . . . He was a man of mettle. He showed it now, insulted and provoked beyond endurance.

" Count yourself lucky I didn't pepper you in the bare brown backside," he remarked icily.

The Colonel's bloodstained jaw slackened, his mouth fell open, his colour became livid, as Minister, Keepers and Boy Scouts clattered up in hobnailed boots and formed circle. There was hostility in every one of those square, mulish, alien faces. The Minister tutted. But enmity gave place to bucolic astonishment, for Lord Balgersho had fallen to the ground. " Hoo Hoo," he moaned, writhing epileptically. " Backside! " Finally he sat up. He was weeping. " His bare brown backside! Rich! Best thing I ever heard." He buried his head.

MacLagan now intervened. " Awa' wi' ye! " he commanded. Keepers, Scouts, and Dougald the sly factotum went away to pick birds or just away. The Minister hovered anxiously. Fiona and Elspeth alone had shown no signs of emotion, similar blank looks on the very beautiful face and the very plain face. Balgersho still sobbed with laughter.

MacLagan stood over him. " His Lordship aye took pleasure from a laddie in the hurrts of others," he said, and turned to Digby: " Mr. Ross was a disappointment." Then he went over to the Colonel. " The Laird will take my arm." Tall servant and pudgy master walked slowly towards the road. But the master of this situation was MacLagan. Digby's admiration for him rose boundlessly in an ocean of contempt for himself.

" We must give thanks for a truly providential escape from worse disaster," the Reverend Mr. McLean said to Elspeth. She turned her full basilisk attention upon him. . . . She noticed him. He blushed.

" Never mind, Digby," said Fiona. " Dinna fash yersel', as we say." She gave him a friendly smile. She supervised the picking of her birds. Then they all walked over to the road.

Balgersho giggled intermittently. " There's more in you than meets the eye, Digby old boy," he said. " First you pepper him. Then you silence the old beezer utterly, which has never before happened in living memory. It's a triumph."

" Don't fool me," Digby said sadly. " It was a disgraceful thing. I have no alternative but to leave at once."

This had a startling effect on the Highland Chieftains. They made common cause.

"But Digby, my dear chap, you can't possibly do that. We're just getting to know you. We like you tremendously already. Don't we, Fiona?"

"Och, yes," she said. "Besides, I was hoping to show you Kilburnie to-morrow. I have so many plans still to make for the Gathering, and people to visit, and I was thinking p'raps you could drive me round."

Digby weakened somewhat at this delicious invitation. Later, he weakened altogether over whisky with the bandaged Colonel, whose three pellets had been removed. Unaccountably, Colonel Galbraith seemed almost submissive. He treated Digby with a new deference.

That day, which had begun happily and continued gloriously and been ruined, was a severe set-back to Digby. He tossed and turned all night in the borderland of dreams and wakefulness. He saw great stags upon the skyline. He saw the rainbow and the lightning. He was in a stormbound thundering Adirondack shack with Madeleine or Fiona, or was it both? Switch to the Colonel holding his anatomy while murderous kilted red-faced Scouts converged with staves, switch to the words of MacLagan passing judgment; *Mr. Ross takes pleasure in the hurrts of others.* On and on, and never ending till Elspeth saved him with a morning cup of tea.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE COLONEL'S humility did not last. That morning at breakfast he was the same old Colonel. He wore three unnecessarily large band-aids on his left cheek, and he remarked, helping himself to eggs and American bacon: "The last time I was wounded was at Mons in '14—long before you people decided to win the war."

"Where were your wounds that time, Colonel?" Digby asked blandly, having outlined a policy in the restless watches of the night.

Galbraith turned with his plate, shot a glance from piggy little eyes.

"Low down in the back," Elspeth said, making one of her rare contributions to human intercourse. "Wasn't it, Daddy?"

They ate. "Excellent bacon." Then at the marmalade stage: "What are your plans to-day, Digby P.? The river's too high."

"Fiona has visits to make about the Gathering. She asked me to drive her around."

"Capital idea. Capital. Watch your step with that girl, though. Full of animal cunning. She smacks of it. Don't she, Elspeth?"

As Elspeth snorted and collected the breakfast dishes and set off with them, her footsteps echoing through stone corridors to the distant kitchen, Digby was once more confused by these people. Balgersho warned him against Galbraith. Galbraith warned him against Fiona. Fiona hated Balgersho and was often angry with her uncle. But she was different, of course. She was honestly passionately forthright: Animal cunning, indeed! The others were the cunning ones. It was strange though, strange even about Fiona, how they would speak ill of one another, and then team up to go hunting, shooting, as if enmity was a thing to turn on and off like a tap, when it suited their book. Back home now, you did business with men you

disliked—you had to. But in your social life you moved with people you were fond of, and everybody made everybody else feel a good guy, a better guy. If the affection lessened, you drifted apart. Well, of course, these people had lived on their estates for centuries, and they were short of neighbours. That must partly be it, but not the whole story, not accounting for the coldbloodedness, the malice. An imperfect democracy, was that a reason? The vestiges of the feudal system? And yet MacLagan had rebuked Lord Balgersho for his unseemly mirth in a manner which would put old Jake Doon in the shade. This Scotland was more beautiful than Digby had expected. These Scots, or the upper crust of them, were totally different from his expectation.

"What's on your mind, Digby P.?" The Colonel's voice was kindly. The Colonel was a lot of fat little men in one fat little man.

"I was thinking how different we are from you," said Digby at the window.

"We're full of sinful hypocrisy and disillusionment, hence honesty," the Colonel said. "And you people bubble over with loving simplicity and violence. There's the difference, or it would be if any generality was ever true. To you friendship is a mutual ego society. To us a friend is quite often a chap we rather dislike. Come to think of it, Digby P., I already detect shameful signs of my acquiring a soft spot for you, even if you do shoot me; and already I detect in myself a shameful readiness, even an urge, to tell you so. It is the impact of American courtesy and faith, and somewhat alarming since I do not believe you are quite such a simple chap as you appear. Well, I shall now go and see how my Giant Lily has fared through the storm. Want to come?"

"Yes, indeed," Digby said, pleased by the Colonel's reluctant show of affection. They always say a Scotsman is unwilling to be your friend, he thought. But when he does admit to friendship, he sticks to you through thick and thin.

"Take Hamish and Fiona," he said now carefully, walking on a moss-covered path. "Would you say they were really friends under it all?"

"No," said the Colonel. "I think friendship under it all is hardly the word in that case."

"But you people do rather like one another, don't you?"

"God, no! We despise one another. Our relations are purely of necessity, or impurely, as the case may be. This chota parcel of Glens abounds in lust, hatred, envy, malice-aforethought, and all manner of wickedness. Famous for it."

"No kidding?"

"No kidding," said the Colonel.

"Historically?"

"You're darn tootin'. Look at that trifling massacre Fiona is always going on about. Look at my great-great-great-grandfather who pickled his first wife in a vat of whisky. What a waste. Look at the 14th Balgersho. Do you know what he did? He caught some of Wade's soldiery, chopped their ears, etc. off and sent them back: That's nothing of course." The Colonel rubbed his hands together. "The truth is we stink with evil, Digby P. You'll be lucky if you get out of this neck of the woods unbesmirched in soul and body."

Digby had been long enough at Glendrogan to take all this with an uneasy grain of salt. "Tell me, Colonel," he said, to change the subject. "Where did you pick up your American slang?"

"Damon Runyon. He is my favourite author. I would go so far as to say my one author. He lulls me to sleep every lonely night of my life, and indeed they have all been lonely since my dear wife, your cousin Mona, died. Now isn't that Gigantium marvellous? Did you ever see such a splendid beast of a thing?"

The lily grew in a dank lush place, the stalk as thick as a man's clenched fist, the colour a sunless green, the height some six feet. It was a fecund-looking plant, truly a splendid beast of a thing.

He now inspected it closely. "Quite unharmed," he muttered. "I can't be certain yet, but I hope, I very much hope he's going to flower this year at least. Bloom, beast! Bloom!"

They moved back to the path. The woods were quiet, air soft, birch trees gnarled, ferns pale, sunlight and dampness. "Talking of lilies you should have seen our garden at Chittipur on the Hooghly. We had a bed of Cannas about fifty feet long, bright scarlet, and in the evening the sun would shine down on them beside the river with boats beyond. It was very fine. Of course Cannas won't grow in this bloody climate." The Colonel sighed. "We had a wizard of a

mali there, I remember. Sant Ram, his name was. Talk about green fingers! He could make anything grow in a lick of spittle. Well, Sant Ram was the best Mali in Bengal, but he had a weakness—couldn't keep off the women. One day Mona caught him *in flagrante delicto* during working hours with the sweeper's wife under our mango tree, of all things, can you believe it? She was simply furious; gave him a damn' good beating, serve the feller right."

"A *beating*?" said Digby. "Cousin Mona?" It was true that everyone had been annoyed beyond measure by her English accent and affectations and endless talk of India, the summer she came over alone to Long Island; but beating a fellow human being! Surely not.

"Certainly," the Colonel said. "Besides, Mona was a bit of a blue stocking. I remember I'd just got back from a route march in time for gimlets before lunch, and she called me out to the garden. There she was standing like a sergeant-major with a walking stick in one hand and the guilty man before her. *Farquhar*, she said. *Tell Sant Ram that he is here to garden not philander. Tell him he's docked five rupees out of thirteen this month. Tell him I will not tolerate immorality.* Well some of that was a bit of a tall order in Hindustani, but I bowdlerized it out."

"So you didn't actually see her beat him," Digby said.

"Not actually, but I'll bet my bottom anna she did. Betcher life she did. You know, Digby P., there's something supremely violent and wonderful about your American women. I ought to know after twenty-five years. We had our bad times, but we were very happy. Mona loved lilies." Big tears welled in the Colonel's eyes. One trickled unhindered down his right cheek, another caught in the band-aid. He got out his handkerchief. "Bloody old fool!" he grumbled.

Something supremely violent and wonderful, putting that to your own wife. Yes, you used to think Madeleine wonderful. But violent. What nonsense! What a shadow Madeleine seemed now beside Fiona who was violent and wonderful and wonderfully violent.

A blue-clad figure was bicycling away from the house. "There goes the Postie." The mail was on a tray in the hall. "Here's one for you, Digby P."

It was a large Ross Corporation envelope, marked "Airmail."

Digby put his fingers into the flap, then thought better of it. He had said that only personal letters were to be forwarded. He walked all the way through the musty old house, past deer and stuffed birds and Galbraith ancestors, to the privacy of his own room. This envelope from home jolted him painfully out of the improbable romantic present.

There were two letters and a typed covering note from Miss Prendergast. He glanced at that first.

DEAR MR. ROSS,

These two letters postmarked 10th and 11th inst. respectively, arrived by first mail this morning, and I hasten to forward them by quickest means as per your instructions for personal mail.

Mrs. Carmody was saying during lunch together that the office never seems to be the same place without Mr. Ross. I hope you are enjoying a lovely time in the peace and inspiration of bonny Scotland and that you will return like a giant refreshed. My own vacation I was telling you about starts to-morrow. With kindest regards.

Ever truly yours,
FRANCES A. PRENDERGAST

That was quite a sweet little note. Digby was touched. He had not given a thought to faithful Miss Prendergast since the day of his arrival.

The second was in Jake Doon's laborious hand:

DEAR MR. ROSS,

Thanks for yours saying you was off to Scotland. Mabel and I hope you have a swell time over there and come back like your old self. I was out last night till ten o'clock got one two and a quarter on the Parmachene another one and a half on the Grey Mare streamer kind of sluggish though it's the hot water I guess. Everything's okay here except them pet loons of yours is dessimating the trout. Two old and two young is too much and I wish you'd say for me to give a couple the coop disgrace what a hope.

The birch partridge hatched good this year so I'm looking for you to be up in the fall soon as the season opens. Well Dig this is

a long letter for me so I'll close hoping you're okay Mr. Ross and not getting into the kind of mischief I was telling you I got myself into one time.

yours faithfully,

JAKE

P.S.—What about a card showing that country?

Digby laughed out loud at this letter. Good old Jake, reading exactly as he sounded.

But now the third one. He turned it over and back, put it down, picked it up. It was thin. "Oh hell," he said, ripping it open:

MY DEAR DIGBY,

Thank you for your letter explaining your Scottish plans. I hope you are having a very rewarding time. It will be nice for you to be on your own at last.

Polly has been kindness itself. She understands so well what a bitter shock all this has been to me after the years. But if I have failed—and any woman must look on the wreckage of her marriage as a failure—I am finding a sanctuary of loneliness now—opportunities to browse over the old books, to contemplate, to think of the meanings of life, and to realise with pain that our time together was a mockery. Please understand that I am not bitter. I ask only that we come graciously to the parting of our ways.

MADELEINE

"My God Almighty!" Digby cried, throwing the thing away. "Of all the pompous sanctimonious phoney hypocrisy. Think of anyone writing that stuff. Think of it!" How could he have lived with this woman?

It *is* true, though, he thought. It *is* true that Madeleine always did become flowery on paper—her pen runs away with her, which only goes to show that the intellectual business is utterly bogus. But I never used to mind because I knew she was warm-hearted and sincere in other things. "Sanctuary of loneliness; browsing over the old books; the meanings of life, the parting of our ways. Oh, God!"

The parting of our ways! That means divorce, doesn't it? And do

I care? Do I give one little damn when I see that other face vividly before me now? No, I do not.

Digby did not care. But he was sad when he remembered their good times together, or times that had seemed good. He sat for a while in the armchair in his hideous bedroom at Glendrogan, waiting to drive over to see Fiona Kilburnie, burning to burn his boats, but remembering.

They sat together in the Bloody Gorge. Ten feet below them the dark river scudded. Beyond was sheer cliff. Behind, the scree rose steeply to broken rock. Above that a precipice.

It was a black brooding place, the place for an old black tale of bloody treachery with the voice of the river hissing and grumbling in its cleft below and beyond, always beyond the soft rising, falling of Fiona's story, and no sun.

" They rolled the muckle rocks," she said quietly, with a backward sweep of her arm, wrist arched, fingers spread. " That was for confusion. Then the cursed Tarrs came down the scree, fifty men to our thirty, armed with the broadsword and us an innocent hunting party. They butchered every living soul among us—Kilburnie himself, Malcolm, Younger of Kilburnie, the clansmen—they hurled the dead dismembered corpses into the river." She pointed her long scarlet-tipped finger at the dark water. " But that blood was never washed away."

Fiona sighed. She looked at Digby. Her eyes were dimmed, her beauty withdrawn and there to see. She was far away and long ago and here as the priestess.

Just then a glint of westering sun struck along the black Bloody Gorge. The tragic story was over; sunlight gave its blessing to her auburn hair.

But the story was not over. " Now it was," she said. " Now at this hour of an August evening. Fiona Kilburnie was just a lassie at the time—sixteen years old and bonny—and she and her distant cousin Ian were dreaming in first love on the heather bank up there beyond the gorge. They heard the screams and murderous yells. Fiona guessed at once it was a Tarr ambush. She drew her dirk—she was allowed a small one being the Chieftain's daughter—and called on Ian

to run with her to the rescue. *No, Fiona!* the laddie cried. *They'll kill you. Let me go!* But she was away already with a toss of her hair. It was just the colour of mine, they say. And she and Ian ran side by side down to sure death to this very place in the gorge. The Tarrs saw her coming just as the last body toppled in the water, just as the first rays of the sun struck in from the west through her bright hair streaming, dirk flashing for revenge. They thought it was God sending vengeance in a woman's shape. They fled.

"Her father was dead, and her brother too, but Fiona had triumphed. The surviving Kilburnies made her Chieftain. From that day to this the head of the Clan can be man or woman."

"It's a wonderful story," Digby said. "A terrible story." He began to understand the hatreds and passions of these Highlands. "You know," he went on. "It's a mighty queer thing, Fiona, but the moment I drove in here the other day I knew there had been murder. I could feel it right in my bones. And another thing! I could feel violence all around me, not only in the past but in the future. I can't explain it."

"There's no explanation for the second sight." Fiona stood up and turned to stare into Digby's eyes. "In the future too? You're a fey man," she said sombrely, and they walked westwards from that place of evil and gallant memory.

"Did the boy—Ian, I think you called him—did Ian and Fiona marry?"

"Yes," she said. "They were married, and he took the Kilburnie name. He had been born Ian Prissitulchan."

"What?" said Digby. He turned to look back down the Bloody Gorge.

"Ian Prissitulchan. Why, Digby?"

"Nothing," he said. "Nothing at all. Rather an unusual name, though, or is it common around here?"

"No. The Prissitulchans are all dead and gone, died out long since. They used to live down near Perthshire, just the one family."

They had driven fifty miles since morning in a great circle over Kilburnie land, over a high road near the topmost limit of the heather where deer lay or browsed—tame where the wind gave no message, galloping under the scented human warning. They had watched a

golden eagle quarter the hill face. They had stopped many times by the wayside for Fiona to speak her summons to the Gathering. Then they had left the domain and visited Crummock in catering matters. Coming back, they had driven past a fine herd of Highland cattle, through the gorge and had parked the car at a wide place and gone down again for the telling of the story. But that interlude was over. Once more they cruised serenely, and the evening sun was warm. Fiona had been gentle, so different by herself away from those others, so kindly too with her humble clansmen. It was indeed a beautiful thing to see their faces light up at the sight of her. It was a thing to sublimate earthly passion, or put it easily to sleep. But sense woke up again now as they drew near the Birks. Sense kept company with, darted in and out of the torrential disturbance of his thoughts.

"Tell me, Digby," she said, sitting away off curled up lazy sleepy like a pussy in the corner. "You have a wife, do you not?"

"Yes," he said. "Yes, I do," and because it seemed a bald answer to such a question: "She's spending August on the Maine coast, at a place called Bar Harbor."

"What like is she?"

That intoxicating inversion. "Madeleine is dark," Digby said. "About your height but . . ." What was the word? *Slimmer?* No, definitely not right. *Less well-developed?* Couldn't say that. "But she's more slightly built."

"D'you mean I'm stocky?" The fire smouldered, responsive to the lightest fanning, the merest zephyr of air.

"No," Digby said too loudly. "You have a swell figure."

Fiona chuckled, rubbing her shoulder-blades to and fro just a little towards him and away from him on the leather. "It *is* good," she admitted and went on: "You're a grand figure of a man, Digby. I'd like to see you in the kilt." It was wonderful the way this child, this woman of nature said whatever came into her head. "How many wives have you had altogether, Digby?"

"Only one," he said, a little put out; but he made a joke of it. "You sound like you thought I was a Mormon."

"Och no!" she said. "I just meant Americans always seem to be going off to Reno and those places you read about; the lucky things to be able to afford it."

He looked at her and she looked back at him with her green eyes, wholly innocent. She sighed a long sigh. "Tell me about yourself," Digby said desperately because he could not stand it. "Why haven't you married long ago?" Then he was afraid she might be angry with him for saying long ago like that.

But she was not angry. "Well," she said, sitting quite straight suddenly beside him, one leg crossed over the other, right foot and ankle beginning an up and down pendulum away from the fulcrum of the other knee. "Well," she said, "the war started when I was just eighteen and I felt I had to do my bit so I joined the Wrens that's our women's part of the Navy and I was stationed away over at Oban the whole war and the sailors were coming and going all the time and I must say there's something about sailors I do like very much but I never seemed to fall in love, really in love I mean, perhaps because there were so many unhappy boys to be nice to and try to make them happy again after those awful convoys. I did my very best." Fiona sighed again. "I had seventy-three proposals and I never even got engaged not once. Sometimes I think I gave the best years of my life. Of course, that's what a war is for."

Digby himself had tried many times to get into the U.S. Navy, but they would never let him. *You're indispensable to the war effort*, they always said. Oh, damn and blast, he thought, remembering that frustration and thinking of what Fiona would have been like as a Wave, not a Wren, all set off in a trim uniform. "Were you an officer?" he asked.

"No. I was a plain Jill Tar I wouldn't have been seen dead with those Gurney hags they called officers we had. Then Daddy died just after the war and I came into my full responsibilities I'd been preparing all my life for as Chieftain. I'll have to get married one of these days though for the sake of the clan but it gets harder and harder to make a choice because I do like men so much and whenever I see a really braw man I want to be nice to him so I'm rather afraid of making a mistake." She turned to stare sadly at Digby. "It's not easy here like in America. You can't have lots of husbands practically all at the same time."

Digby gulped. "You can't there, either," he said. Dumb?

Abysmal ignorance? Did that matter? Not one tiny jot or tittle or iota.

"Besides," she said, coming closer to him as they drove into the Birks and along a winding mile of drive where grass and weeds thrust up through the road surface. "There's not many suitable men in Scotland and I wouldn't take a Sassenach for a husband not with my last breath." Her eyes flashed. "The English yoke sucking our lifeblood all these centuries and never more than at the present time. Do you know, Digby, that all our exports make us balanced up ourselves. How's the way they say it?"

"Give you a balanced economy?" he suggested.

"That's it. You're so clever Digby. I knew as soon as I saw you and I'll tell you a secret. *I'm in the Scottish Nationalists.* They were up seeing me last month, and they said: *Fiona Kilburnie you're a symbol of Scotland just like the Stane o' Scone.* Which was the thing a hero rescued from some Abbey down in London. *When freedom comes your beauty will be an inspiration over the whole length and breadth of Bonny Scotland.* So you see Digby that's another reason because I'm a symbol why I have to be very careful about choosing a husband. But you won't breathe a word about it to Uncle Farquie or that stinker Hamish, will you?"

"Of course not," Digby said. "I'm afraid I'm very ignorant though. I hardly know about Scottish Nationalism. Do you really plan to rise in revolt?"

"Yes," she cried. "We will rise and drive every man jack over the borders, not that there are very many because it's a funny thing Digby but the English don't seem to like living in Scotland. Of course it was a bit different in the last war when we all made common cause. Then there were heaps and heaps of English boys at Oban. Love isn't being bad is it Digby except with an enemy? Do you like love, Digby?"

"Very much," he said. The last querulous murmur of conscience fled like the Tarrs of Balgersho.

She gave his right knee a squeeze, and took her hand away. "There are the two Royal Stags." She pointed across to a park where two great deer were browsing. "They're better than royals," she explained. "One's fourteen points and one fifteen. We catch

two calves every year—so the stock's always wild—and keep them in a stag's nursery till they're big. But there's just two Royal Stags at the one time. Then if the King wants them all he has to do is send me a message, he doesn't ever send messages nowadays which is rather a pity. It's a sort of symbol like I was telling you about my beauty when the time comes."

" But the King is King of England, isn't he? What about Scottish Nationalism? "

" Och, the King's different," Fiona said. " I like the King very much. I don't count *him*."

They were coming to the Birks. Digby had been there that morning, but seeing it again now for the second time in late sunlight, he was even more impressed and staggered. It was an enormous palace of dome and castellated tower, of fountain and terraced steps, by far the largest mansion he had ever seen. But the panes were streaked, the fountains did not play, the grass grew rankly. Only in the square bastion of the East Tower—which he had watched from Glendrogan—were windows clean; and from a high flagstaff flew the standard of Kilburnie—a golden stag upon a green background.

" Here we are," said Fiona Kilburnie of the Birks. She yawned and stretched on the seat of the Cadillac, body arched, arms high over her head, long fingers spread, and held that a moment, and let the lazy tension cascade down out of her. " Oh, I'm so happy and hungry and thirsty for a dram."

CHAPTER EIGHT

DIGBY WANTED to throw open the trunk and carry the six remaining boxes right away now into the East Tower, but he restrained himself; he was not of those obvious men who shower largesse. "Which would you prefer?" he said. "Scotch or Bourbon? I have both."

"Bourbon," she said. "I always try new things. It's like people."

He removed a case of Old Grand-Dad and they entered.

"The Tower's in four storeys," Fiona explained. "The kitchen and pantry and cloakroom and those things down here. The smoking-room next. Then my bedroom on the second floor, and Nanny on the third and there's a flat roof at the very top where I sunbathe all by myself not wearing a stitch on fine days." They climbed stairs and into a big room, a lovely room with deep embrasured windows on three sides. "We could take some of your whisky now Digby if you like. Here's a hammer to open the box. I'll get glasses."

Digby knelt and set about the case with a clawed hammer. It was difficult. He never had been any good at carpentry. He needed a chisel. But even more he needed the soothing easement of a drink. There! The corner board split and rose with a squeak of nails. He drew out a straw-girded bottle.

"And would this be the one, Mr. Ross, my Fiona was speaking about? *A fine chentleman from over the water*, was what she said to me."

Digby looked up. A smiling old lady stood at the door. She was plump, her cheeks as red as Mackintosh apples, her hair grey. It must be Nanny.

In a way she did remind him of his own Scottish Nanny except

for the all-embracing benevolence which was so different and he knew right away that this kind person could never do the sort of thing Nanny had once done when he was four and it had rankled ever since. She came into his room late at night and said *Are you asleep, Digby?* and he, being nervously anxious to please, replied: *Yes, Nanny.* So she took down his pyjamas, smacked his bottom hard and said: *There's a skelping to learn you not to tell wicked fibs.* Which he had not forgotten; indeed, it had become a criterion of injustice, linked always with the name of Scotland.

He remembered this as he stood up to shake hands.

From below: " Nanny! Where the hell did you put those big tumblers? "

" My sweetie's that impatient," Nanny chuckled. " Mr. Ross will excuse me." She bustled out of the room. " Hush, Dearie," he could hear her chiding on the way downstairs. " Keep yer bonny hair on."

Fiona brought glasses and water and they drank Bourbon sitting side by side on the sofa. " It's the most different taste," she said. " Terribly nice and strong. Let's drink lashions to work up a huge appetite while Nanny gets the cold grouse and strawberries which is all we're having for our dinner on a tray in here then I'll take you round the rest of the house Digby. Would you like that? "

" Suits me," Digby said. " That would be swell. Anything you say at all, Fiona." He was reaching the end of his second four ounces, keeping pace with her. She drank wholeheartedly like a man. She did everything, well almost everything, like a man and much better than a man and she was the most womanly wonderful woman or girl rather.

Nanny panted up to pull cords at a dumb-waiter. She put the trays in front of them. " There," she said. " A whole grouse each, and thick cream to the strawberries, and my own bread baked this forenoon. Is there anything else Mr. Ross would fancy? "

" Not a thing. This is perfect, thank you, Nanny. The best-looking dinner I ever had in my life."

" Go away upstairs," said Fiona. She seemed to treat the old dear with scant consideration.

" I'll wait a wee minute," Nanny announced calmly. She perched

herself on the arm of a chair. " I like fine to see my Bebby eat a bird in the fingers."

Digby had copied Fiona's example, and as he bit into the succulent breast of grouse he watched her sink white teeth into hers, the rippling line of jawbone, the honest animal grace of back of the hand wiped across mouth. She was intent, lost in a fanged pleasure of eating. She ripped a leg off and tore fiercely at the dark meat. So did he.

Nanny sighed. " It's nice for my Bebby and me to have a chentleman the like of Mr. Ross to dinner in the house." She waddled off.

Digby basked in this approval, and in the well-being of good food, and in the benefaction of plenty whisky but not too much, and in the bright perils of imagination. " Has she been with you all your life? " he asked to keep it ordinary.

" From the month," Fiona said, whatever that might mean. " The old Bezzom's fair daft about men." She laid down the last bared bone and sucked her fingers, pop, one by one.

" There's no two ways about it," she remarked later. " Grouse and strawberries make a marriage, and such a pity you only get them together for a week or two because of the seasons."

No two ways? Ways? What was that harsh chord of interruption? *Come graciously to the parting of our ways.* Digby groaned.

" What's up, Digby? Are you not well? "

" I've never felt so well," he said hastily, " even though I guess I've eaten too much. That was a delicious supper."

" I could start all over again," Fiona said. " I'm not a bit full. Look! " She stood in profile, the line of her waist a perfect flatness in the concavity between pointer of hip bone and challenge of breast. She gave him her hand. " Come on then, Digby. Let's go round."

She took a bunch of keys off a hook on the panelled wall, and he followed her through a door into the main house. Their shoes made footprints in the immemorial dust, echoing from one great room to another, where spider webs crossed every murky angle, and filaments made eery elfin brush upon the cheek, and wallpaper looped in faded ribbons, and gilt was tarnished, and odd chairs, sofas, stools, pictures and pianos stood and hung forlornly. There were mousetraps too.

" I guess it's very old," he said, oppressed by the harvest of so much human effort rotting back to nothing, oppressed by a decaying

panoply of pride, yet feeling reverence for the procession passing crumbling serving strangely all to this moment to this culmination in the lithe chieftain who unbelievably would one day also crumble back to dust.

" The East Tower is thirteenth century," Fiona explained. " But this part was rebuilt and made huge in the nineteenth when the building races were on. Everyone tried to have the biggest house and we beat them all including the Balgershos. It's a very handy place, really. It could easily be done up if I had the money." She glanced at him and walked on. Her stout right shoe crunched out of sight into the hardwood flooring. She stumbled and swore.

" Is that dry rot? " he asked. It could hardly be anything else.

" Och, no. Just a few bad planks." They had gone downstairs and were coming back eastwards he could tell from the long shadows of oak and elm in the park. Grass grew outside above the bottom of the windows.

" This is the ballroom," Fiona said, opening one-half of a double door. It was an immense chamber, a hundred feet long at least, with three straight walls and a long graceful bow of windows on the outside. " All the Kilburnies," she said, waving a hand at portraits in double rows. " They're needing to be restored, some of them. Here's the Fiona who routed the Balgershos I was telling you about." Digby looked at the face, which was hardly more than a visible oval in murky canvas. Was there a likeness? There might be or there might not be. Fiona stopped in the middle of the room.

" The great chandelier weighs half a ton. Listen! " She picked up a long staff which lay conveniently to hand, stretched on tiptoe and tapped the chandelier smartly. A myriad facets sparkled in the evening light; there was a clinking trill as a thousand slivers of glass made musical frolic. It was a splendid chandelier.

" But the most unusual thing about it is the Cairngorm. Come here, Digby, and I'll show you. You have to stand right under the very centre and look up. No, come closer. Don't worry, Digby, it won't fall. It never has yet."

But Digby was not worrying lest the chandelier should fall. He stood over against Fiona, touching her in just two places, and then a third—hips meeting for support and balance—as they craned their

necks back to see the noble Cairngorm which was an amber jewel in the very heart and root of a twinkling city of glass. "I can see it," he said against his Adam's apple: It was a difficult pose to hold; yet he would not break it.

She found that difficulty too, for she tottered, grasped at his shoulders to save herself, and he to save himself, and both to save one another. Their chins came together, one bristly and one limpid soft, stayed, breath mingling, then rolled down over into a first kiss in silence except for the dwindling fairy tintinnabulation overhead.

Time was a waterfall until Fiona disentangled herself. "How did it happen, Digby?" she murmured. "Just suddenly out of the blue and us never dreaming of it did you like it Digby?"

"Like it!" he said, seizing her again, but she broke away from him. She was strong. "I'll say I liked it."

"I knew you would. Oh Digby, and you married and everything. So wicked of us but you do kiss beautifully. *What's that?*"

It was a man's voice calling in the distance. "Hamish!" she snarled, angry in the twinkling of an eye. "He *would* come now. Wait here, Digby, while I sort him."

He watched her stride down through the ballroom, kilt-pleats swinging lifting falling swaying. The key rasped; the door opened; he was alone.

Digby drew gulps of musty air. He looked unseeingly at time-dimmed Kilburnies. He was here in the ballroom of a derelict Scottish mansion; but he was not here or there or anywhere except in the arms of Fiona Kilburnie at the beginning of a journey which had been decreed for him. Now at the centre window looking through a cracked pane at cupid-dotted terrace and urns and moss-crannied steps and a sweep of overgrown lawn down to the park where two Royal stags browsed. Browsed? *Browsed over the old books* like Madeleine. Here steady! he said to himself. But he felt no remorse, not a vestige. He steadied himself only against a clamorous riot of his senses never before experienced in forty-one years.

Is it true? Is it a dream all this that has happened to me in how many, in four days since I left home? The far past and the present and the golden future all together running back and forward so that it could be that first Fiona, and this one and another yet to come, the

three Fionas waiting for a man mysteriously blessed, linked and fated after the centuries, called by a whim across the intervening ocean. Now I've finally gone crazy.

But it was delightful madness, and as he watched the distant stags, which had ceased to feed and were having a half-hearted sparring match with antlers locked, he was reminded of that whim which had captured his fancy—the hat trick, the stag, the salmon and the grouse, *the aim of every Highland Nimrod.* How trivial it seemed compared with this chase.

Why was Fiona being so long? Balgersho! You couldn't trust that guy an inch in love or war. Digby made one of his quick decisions. He walked on rubber-soled shoes down the ballroom and into the East Tower. He heard voices outside. He went that way to say *hallo, how are you,* to this attractive Hamish chap he couldn't help liking.

But something made him stop. " Fair's fair, Hamie," she was saying. " Fair dos."

" But that's just what I'm saying, you beautiful idiot. All profits on a fifty-fifty basis. Otherwise cut-throat competition. Then I'll run rings round you."

" Stop it, Hamie! Oh, all right then, except for the Gathering. But I'll not share on that. The Gathering's sacred."

" Sacred my foot, but okay, I agree. No treachery though. If you do me down, I'll . . ."

Digby was not a key-hole knave, but he was not a fool either to appear like an inquisitive djinn from nowhere. He tiptoed back to the ballroom door. Some private business, not his affair. He cleared his throat and walked heavily towards them.

" Here's Digby," she said more loudly.

" Hallo, old boy," said Balgersho. " Fancy seeing you. What's she been doing to you? " He smiled his disreputable smile.

" She's been giving me an excellent cold dinner," Digby said. But since what else she had just been giving him was particularly vivid and since he was not a natural-born liar and had never had to acquire that spurious accomplishment, he grasped for another subject, any subject: " Have you ever done the hat-trick, Hamish? I meant to ask you."

Balgersho laughed. "The hat-trick, the triple feat. Depends?" Digby told him. "Seeing those stags just now reminded me."

"Yon's the kind of daft trick he's aye up to," said Fiona. She looked and sounded rancorous again.

"I do wish you'd spare us this music-hall dialect, Fiona. Digby isn't impressed, are you, Digby? Actually, I've done the hat-trick five times. It's mostly a matter of the fish—simple enough if you can get that. But I did a double last year, two of each. That's quite a different cup of tea, kettle of salmon. Why?"

"I was interested that was all," said Digby, which he was not. He was interested in when this smart-alecky peer of the busted realm would go away.

"I say, old boy, I wonder if you could possibly do me a favour? That miserable little kite packed up on me just along the road. I only got into the field by the skin of my eye-teeth. Fuel stoppage, I think, and the thing is I said I'd drop in late at the fighter-boys' dinner in Crummock to-night. Can't disappoint them; I mean two or three were in my wing. Do you think you could possibly lend me your car till to-morrow morning?"

"Why certainly," Digby said at once; then remembered the question of his return to Glendrogan, and the implications of that. "Provided there's some way I can get back," he added to dispel any wrong impressions.

"I could lend Digby the Austin," Fiona said. She too seemed anxious to see the last of Balgersho.

"Many thanks, then. I suppose the key's in the car." Lord Balgersho loped over to the Cadillac, turned with his hand on the door and said: "Fair do's, remember, Queenie."

"There are five boxes of food and drink in back, in the trunk," Digby called wisely. "Perhaps you could keep it locked. Not that anyone here would ever take anything, of course, I'm sure," he added, awkward at the imputation in a strange land of sterling repute.

"Wouldn't they just!" Balgersho drove off smoothly.

"You'll be lucky if you see that again," Fiona said, but she sighed with relief. "Thank goodness he's gone. Shall we go and have a drink of your lovely whisky now, Digby?"

" Lead me to it." Inhibitions? Melancholy doubts? Had he ever had them?

The level in that Bourbon bottle sank by leaps and fair division to the bottom while Highland evening passed into Highland night and the moon rose over mountains to the south. An owl hooted beyond her, beyond the sofa, beyond the window somewhere outside. Hooooooh! a cool mournful antiphony to warmth. " You're wunnerful," Digby mumbled. He ran his hands up one on either side of her head close and drew fingers out through sleek tresses feeling the colour of them, the strength of them, the softness of them and everything else this side of owl, mountains, window, cynical old man in the moon.

" Digby! "

" Mmmmmmmm? "

" You'll help me over the Gathering, won't you? "

" Sure, sure." What was that? " Sure I will."

" Would you like to go up on the roof for a minute."

" 'Kay."

" Wait then. I'll call you."

He sat alone, not for long, not with verbal thoughts. " Digby! "

He ran up the carpeted stairs. She stood on the next dim landing and took his hand. " I was so hot," Fiona murmured. " Wearing all those things." She rustled beside him as they climbed past a light-chinked door and came at last on to the roof. It was a long robe of thin soft-touching silk. Yes, it was tartan faintly lined in moonlight. " Now kiss me again. . . . Is that better? Can you feel me against you all up and down? "

He fumbled with the knot, pulled it, the robe fell apart and back over moon-dark summits high on the East Tower on a summer's night.

" Do you want me? Do you love me terribly? Is loving me the only thing? "

" Yes." It was the only thing. No other thing had ever existed.

" I just want to show you the amphitheatre. There! Do you see where the rocks are shining this side of the hill? That's the place of the Gathering of Clan Kilburnie. There they all pass before me in review. It's cold, Digby. You made me cold undoing me like that."

" Come on then! " Digby growled. " Stop fooling around." He had come far. He, *he* was the arrogant Chieftain of this Gathering.

" Impatient man! Angry man attacking me."

They went down and into the room where kilt and other things lay in disorder on the ample bed. She threw them all away. There was a shaded light in the corner. " I don't like it too dark," she said.

" Look . . ." he began later, honourable to the eleventh hour.

" Silly darling. You needn't worry."

" Oh, Digby is my darling," she sang contralto in the dim strong night. " Oh, Digby is my darling, my darling, my darling. Oh Digby is my darling, my young Chevalier." She could sing too.

" Who are all those little fellows? " he asked some time or other leaning across to inspect eight kilted dolls or mannikins upon a bedside table. They were complete to sporrans, bonnets, hose, varying tartans dark and jazzy.

" Those are my wee Highland men," Fiona said. She rolled over on her front. " Colin on the left, then Donald, Sheepy, Fergus, Geordie, Douglas, Torquil, and Neil's the last one. Don't you think they're rather sweet, Digby? "

He didn't. For some reason he didn't like the creatures. " What are they in aid of? "

Fiona giggled. It was first of the only two times he ever heard her giggle. " Silly Digby," she said. " They're not in *aid* of anything. They're just my wee men to keep me company."

" Are they meant to be real people? " he demanded.

" Och no! How would dolls be like real people? You couldn't be jealous of a doll, Digby. Come here now."

He went there. It was getting late. A clock struck far away downstairs, so many strokes it must be twelve.

" I read that Americans weren't good at love. I read that somewhere."

" Why? "

" It said they were always thinking of the next appointment. Yes, that was what it said. I don't think people should put wrong things in books do you Digby? I think that's what books are for. I mightn't ever have known the truth except for you."

This is the best moment of my life, he thought, to hear such praise

from her. But even then he saw through a chink to carving on the wall, weird strange and simple, and it said: NOT DIGBY AS DIGBY, BUT DIGBY HOMO SAPIENS AMERICANUS male prototype recorded in the Library of Fiona's Congress. He dismissed the absurd visual notion.

"Digby P. Ross," she murmured. "It's such a rich solid sort of name. What does the P. stand for, Digby?"

I knew she would ask me. I knew it ever since this afternoon, back of the pleasure and delirium. And do I tell her? Do I keep my secret? Much wiser not to say.

But he had hesitated too long. "Tell me! Please tell me, Don't be mean, Digby." She knew. Some instinct told her it was important.

"Digby Prissitulchan Ross," he said. Prissy Ross at his first school, just prissy enough always afterwards to be afraid of a funny public label on the road through life.

Fiona sat up in tousled glory beside him. Her mouth made an O like Miss Prendergast that fateful morning, that divinely chosen morning. But blankness was succeeded by great joy. "Prissitulchan!" she cried, rasping the dry sound up through her throat. "My Prissitulchan! I knew there was some reason. Oh Digby, but we're cousins! Why didn't you tell me?"

"I don't use the name," he said. Might as well be honest. "Prissy means sort of priggish in America. And of course I had no idea about that story. You see, my grandfather was a shepherd's son, and he emigrated back in the sixties. It was his middle name too, and my father's, and we never traced the lineage or where we came from except that it was Scotland. This country seems pretty tiny and all of one piece when you look at it from over there." He got up. He was shy about the whole business. He wished he had not told her. It was nearly half-past one. What was that Colonel going to say?

"The marvellous thing about it," Fiona said sitting with her chin on her knees, her back flowing up, a sheen on it faint like velvet. "The marvellous thing," she mused, "is that now you're a blood relation, I can ask you to really help me over the Gathering. I can ask you much more. You see I'm absolutely broke, Digby darling, and we must make it a success with my clansmen coming from the four corners of the earth. How much can you manage?"

He was tying his tie, a depressing aftermath to love's pageant. "How much do you need?" It seemed to him now at this bleak moment that everyone wanted things and nobody gave him things, even Fiona. But of course she's given me something. She's given me just everything, just her all. Let me see, a hundred pounds is say two-eighty. "Would a hundred pounds be any help?"

"It would be a great help." Grateful but not ecstatic.

"I could make it two. I'd be delighted if you would accept two hundred." Why this formality? Why? Because he wasn't made of money, and surely she needn't ask him quite so much as if it was a price to pay for two hours, for the two best hours of his life.

"Oh, thank you, Digby. Thank you a thousand times for being so generous and sweet. You know it's not for me. I wouldn't take a penny for myself. I'm not like . . . Well, I'm not like that."

"Only one condition," he said. "That you don't breathe my middle name to a soul."

"Of course I won't Digby. You aren't ashamed of it though are you not one of the finest old Highland names even if it has died out?"

"Of course not," Digby said. "It's just what you might call a querk of mine."

"You know what would be wonderful? It would be wonderful if you could sort of march in the Gathering at my side like my Prince Consort like the old Ian Prissitulchan who charged with the old Fiona Kilburnie and perhaps you could make a speech. My clansmen would be terribly thrilled. It would be the making of the whole thing to have history again like that, me the last of the Kilburnies and you the only Prissitulchan in the world. It's like fate Digby as I've been thinking all the time since I met you in a queer way before I knew we were relations even."

It was indeed. It was the beautiful inexorable hand of fate.

"Can you make speeches, Digby?" She stood up to yawn. She yawned more like a sleepy Highland Venus than it was possible to imagine, so wild and free and proud of her possessions including him it seemed.

"Yes," he said. He was an extremely good speaker actually, as everybody said. He felt better again and wonderfully mad or daft. "I can make speeches and shoot grouse and pepper that corny old

Colonel and do the hat-trick and make love to you and write an ode. I can do anything you like, anything at all, but I do not wish to have my P. disclosed. Let's have a quick drink before I go."

"You're a funny person," she said, putting on the robe with a deft wriggle which was disturbing even now. "Not a bit like other people. So serious most of the time and humble, and then suddenly making cocky jokes as if you were only twenty or something. Come downstairs and we'll have a muckle dram each."

As it turned out, they had two big drams each from another bottle. "*Schlanch*," she said at the second one. "That means: Good Health, my Digby."

"*Skol*," he said cleverly. "That means the same. *Skol*, my Fiona." He felt so good that he sang it. "Now I really must go. What shall I tell your Uncle Farquie if he hears me come in, if I ever get there that is, no reflection on your teensy-weensy automobile?"

She studied him. "You're all right are you Digby. You haven't had too much? You're not a wee thing fu' as we say?"

"Certainly not." Fiona herself was manifestly cold sober, and she was only a woman and he was a strong man, so he was sober. He did feel fine though. He felt tremendously happy and pleased with himself and more madly in love than ever after the storming of this frail citadel. Frail citadel was rather good. "Come, Fiona," he said with a masterful Casanovian air which was new and a revelation to him like everything else. He put his arm round her pliant waist, woman complete untrammelled by girdle or foundation. She leaned on him to the door and downstairs. "I like absolutely everything about you," he remarked. "But one of the things I like best is your whole-hearted attitude toward matters of sex. To you, I feel sure, physical love is the very cornerstone of existence. I find that a healthy manifestation." He had used some of this material in a different context in his recent speech to the Boston Chamber of Commerce. For physical love read free enterprise. It was a splendidly wacky situation.

"Love is what makes the world go round," Fiona said with her deep natural wisdom. "Love and the clan are the only two things I care about. I love the clan and I love love. I don't know which I love most. I suppose you think I'm very naughty, Digby."

" In no sense," he pontificated. " You are a mother to your clan, and a mate to your man. I can think of nothing more natural and perfect. There's nothing naughty about that. You'd better not come outside, Fiona. I wouldn't want to have you catch cold."

" I never catch colds," she said. " Besides, I must show you the garage." They went round the angle of the tower. Moonlight touched thirteenth century stone, gleamed on the smooth trunks of beeches, cast mysterious shadows, sparkled on dew on a small close-cropped piece of lawn, the night owl hooted, the old man in the moon grinned all over his pitted face.

Fiona broke free from Digby, slipped off her robe, threw it to him, and ran laughing across the lawn. She was a dryad, darting from shadow to paleness, twirling in the cool night, dancing a few steps of the Highland Fling with traditional cries, slipping to the ground, rolling happily on wet grass, lying still at last face down arms spread in total surrender to the earth. The dew glistened on her.

Nanny's voice from high above, chuckling, clucking: " My naughty Bebby at her capers soaked all over and that happy. Come away in, Dearie, and I'll give you a nice rub down with a dry towel. Mr. Ross should please send my Bebby ben the house."

Fiona paid no attention. Digby felt no embarrassment. He had made a long journey from New York City to this enchanted Glen.

" Come away, my Pet."

Fiona rolled over. " Hud yer whissht, you old bezzom."

" Tut-tut now," said Nanny, not a bit put out.

" Where's the car ? " asked Digby. It was two o'clock. " Where's that lil' ole rattletrap of yours? "

Fiona sprang to her feet and flashed into a rage with arms akimbo. " Don't you dare make fun of me, too poor like a Kirk mouse to afford a new one."

" Sorry, Fiona," he said, and quoted: " Keep your bonny hair on, Dearie."

She was calm again, took him to the outhouse-garage. The starter would not work. Digby cranked and cranked and cranked, not a spark of life. He leaned against the wall, out of breath, not used to winding cars. " I guess I'd better walk," he panted. Things were going round a bit.

"You could take Nanny's bike," Fiona said. "Can you ride one?"

"Ride a bike?" It was twenty-odd years since he had ridden a bicycle. But once learned never forgotten, everyone knew that. Besides, he could do anything, anything at all now to-night. "Sure I can ride a bike."

"Mr. Ross is taking your bike, Nanny. Gotta lamp?"

Nanny had no lamp.

"I don't need one," Digby said. "Plenty silvery moon."

"It's not that," Fiona explained. "It's Constable McIntoon. Our bobby is an absolutely gudgey stinker out in the wee small hours trying for promotion."

"If I see him," Digby said. "I shall either hop off or ride him down according to my mood."

"Which reminds me," she said. "I must get a good night's rest. I'm on the Bench with Uncle Farquhar to-morrow."

"On the bench with Uncle Farquhar? My dear girl, what next?" Digby sniggered.

"Don't be a fool," she hissed, hands on hips again. "We're trying criminals."

"Oh, I see. I beg your pardon, Fiona. I didn't know you were a judge too, was all."

"Well now you know." She was mollified. "Do be careful of that McIntoon, Digby."

He embraced her once more finally under the approving coos of Nanny, gave over the tartan robe, grasped handlebars and found pedal. "Careful?" he said loudly. "Careful! Caution ne'er stormed a fortress in life's battle." It was the codification of his new philosophy. "Good night, Fiona, my Queen, my distant cousin. Thanks a million. Thanks more than I can say for everything. Good night, Nanny. Give your Bebby a good rub down."

He mounted and wobbled off with dignity. No, he had not lost the art.

CHAPTER NINE

Constable Angus McIntoon believed that man was made for LAW, and McIntoon was its instrument.

As a desk policeman in a city constabulary he might have been a paragon; as a constable in a succession of lackadaisical country districts in Crummockshire he was a menace. Inspector Rose summed it up adequately to Inspector Holt: *Man*, he said, *It's no right to wish death upon a fellow human, but it would be a rare saving of embarrassment to you and me and the Force and the County if the Good Lord took that McIntoon unto His Bosom.* Constable McIntoon, however, remained in good health, never made a mistake and followed the inexorable path of duty. He was the most unpopular Bobby in living memory.

He waited now at 2.15 a.m. on the fourteenth of August. His bicycle lay hidden in a bed of nettles. He himself sat in shadow at the North end of the old bridge. The river was wide here, a fisherman's path running along each bank. In the light of the moon he could see half a mile upstream to the right, downstream to the left. The river burbled and the water glistened and twice a salmon jumped clean silvery exploding the peace of night.

The constable was not here for beauty's sake. He was here because last week he had observed a small puppy-dog chewing at a salmon's head. McIntoon missed nothing; he had not missed this object outside the cottage of Donny Cleghorn, a rabbit trapper by occupation, a drunken wastrel when he had the cash, an inveterate poacher always.

But a salmon's head was not evidence enough to lay charges. For that, you had to catch the poacher red-handed, having committed or in the act of committing the offence. McIntoon knew that rabbits were scarce this year, that Cleghorn was stony broke because of his

thriftless ways, that he would likely be trying for another fish to sell away for beer money or to feed his dirty bairns.

So, every night since the constable had lurked. Now at last his patience might be rewarded. Shortly after midnight a glimmer of light had appeared in Donny's tumbledown cottage. He had hurried to this place of vantage at the bridge. He sat as still as a graven image.

But crime did not come along the river. It came down the narrow road from the Birks. It came first in the shape of a bicycle without lamp. It came second in the shape of a most erratic progress clearly visible in moonlight—the rider fell off, picked himself up, mounted and wobbled nearer. It came third in the shape of loud shoutings, then offensive strangely-alien song, then fierce animal cries.

Constable McIntoon crouched in the shadows beyond the bridge. He gripped the baton, symbol and weapon of his office. Twelve years he had been the guardian of justice; twelve years had justice been denied him by corrupt superiors. Sooner or later he would wear them down. Perhaps at last this early morning he would stride on to a sergeant's stripes. He licked his lips, formulating charges.

Medical men say that the human engine sags to its lowest and slowest in the early hours of the morning, or the wee small hours as Fiona would have it.

Digby's engine, however, was an exception shortly after two a.m. on August the fourteenth. He felt splendid as he bicycled back down that same avenue. The Royal Stags were still browsing. The moonlight gave cool and adequate illumination. He was not happy by absence-of-unhappiness which is the best that many can hope for after forty. He was positively happy now at this triumphant time, and as long as his thoughts remained unspoken, he rode moderately straight on Nanny's bicycle.

The hand of destiny lies over all, he thought. For me this has been ordained, good old Digby, President of the Ross Corporation, one who declined to be a Man of Distinction, member of this club and that club and so on and so on: for me it was ordained from the beginning that I should come to the Highlands to learn what love can be. Fiona! Golly, what a girl! She could make a fortune in Hollywood, that baby, that Bebby. But too proud. She loves her

clan too much. I would not love my clan so much, loved I not Digby more. Oh, Love! And not only a physical thing. No, not by any means. So wise and passionately different from anyone I ever knew. Only I hate those kilted ogres by her bed. *Put them away*, I shall say next time, touch wood.

Not only ordained, but forecast too. I knew that very first day at the Bloody Gorge. Now take even the Colonel, what a four-flusher, what a slave driver to his dumpling daughter, but I like him and he likes me over the mountains to the sea. Even old Galbraith seems to wear a mantle of prophecy in terms of India. First he told about the duck boy. Then I peppered him, serve him right the old jerk. Then to-day, I mean yesterday, he told that story about his Indian gardener surprised in *flagrante delicto* by Cousin Mona. Not that anybody surprised us, nobody could have except Nanny, but *flagrante delicto* was certainly true and Fiona capering, a woodland highland-dancing nymph, not among the cannas or the mango tree but in and out the beeches all around for me.

Hitherto Digby had not spoken. Now, as he passed in good order through ivy-mantled stag-emblazoned gates to the public road, he felt a great need to shout and sing and vie with the moon for possession of this night land. What, though? What? A recitation first—something that spoke of glorious deeds, something that shouted a wild rhythm, driving the right foot and the left the right foot and the left foot down upon the pedals. Far away he saw the bridge. A bridge! Ah yes, he had it! Just the right tempo. Treasured all these years by the photographic memory which was his gift:

He reeled, and on Herminius
He leaned one breathing space;
Then, like a wildcat mad with wounds,
Sprang right at Astur's face.
Through teeth, and skull, and helmet
So fierce a thrust he sped,
The good sword stood a hand-breadth out
Behind the Tuscan's head.

It's the wrong way round, Digby thought. Horatius was defending,

and I'm charging at the bridge. Oh well, never mind, the principle's the same.

His left foot slipped off the pedal. The bicycle lurched, weaved over and back across the narrow road. " Steady, female velocipede! " he cried. Mind triumphed over matter. He rode on with mighty voice:

" On Astur's throat Horatius
Right firmly pressed his heel,
And thrice and four times tugged amain,
Ere he wrenched out the steel.
' And see,' he cried, ' the welcome,
Fair guests, that waits you here!
What noble Lucumo comes next
To taste our Roman cheer? '

Digby bellowed that challenge. He was beside himself. He was Horatius the wrong way round. He rode into the ditch. " Come, come," he remarked severely to himself, stung by nettles, otherwise unhurt and undismayed. He mounted again, and now he was lined up for the assault. He remembered that bridge with a two-foot parapet on either side, a bad cycling bridge at any time, definitely a hazard now in his elated condition he was prepared to admit, being a sensible guy. I'll have to take it fast, he thought. I'll have to charge the goddam hump-backed thing and go up over through and down the other side, thus achieving optimum efficiency in balance and direction. If it was possible for me to be nervous, I would be nervous. Courage then, Ross!

Digby was rather high for the second time since college days. His college days came now to help him negotiate this tricky obstacle. Of a sudden, as he rode to the attack, he was not here at all. He was back in the stadium of the Crimson banners. He was being tough on poor old Eli, the well-loved and hated enemy. He was seeing the bleachers blue turn pale with fright. He was hearing the Boola Boola of the beaten bulldogs, defeated more often in song than fact. He fell off and got on again.

But there was song:

" O'er the stands in flaming crimson
Harvard banners fly ;
Cheer on cheer, like volleyed thunder,
Echoes to the sky.
See the crimson tide is turning
Gaining more and more,
Then FIGHT, FIGHT, FIGHT, for we win to-night,
Old Harvard for evermore."

He lined up dead-centre, faster and faster and faster.

" H—H A—A R—R V—V A—A R—R D—D
RAH RAH RAH RAH RAH
RAH RAH
FIGHT TEAM FIGHT"

The cool wind touched his heated face. The pedals twinkled as Digby swept good and true over the hump—limpid water far down below cheated on either side—and the envious McIntoon came out of hiding. He barred the way, right hand up, constabular buttons gleaming unmistakably even to a stranger from overseas. " Halt! " he shouted harshly. " Halt in the name of the Law! "

Hop off or ride him down according to my mood, Digby had told his lady-love. But it was not a matter of his mood. Sharp-needled intuition told him that the application of brakes would spell disaster. Self-preservation gave him no alternative but to ride the man down. Among so many detestable virtues, McIntoon did possess a certain dogged courage. He stood his ground.

They clashed at some twenty miles per hour. The Constable was brushed aside; Digby lurched, reeled and fell heavily. A pedal twirled, a wheel spun on with aimless hum, otherwise silence till he got up. He felt himself. Miraculously, he was okay. The heavy footsteps of the policeman.

" Look here, Officer," panted Digby wrathfully. " Why in hell didn't you come out sooner? How d'you expect me to stop on a little gangplank of a bridge? What is this, anyways? "

" I'll tell ye what this is," said McIntoon. He was a tall thin man with cadaverous cheeks, a waxed moustache, a down-hung mouth.

Even in moonlight you could tell at once how right Fiona had been when she called him a stinker. "This is firstly, riding a bicycle without lights in hours of darkness—secondly breach of the peace in shoutin' insults and bad language while riding said bicycle—thirdly drunk and disorderly in charge of a vehicle, to wit, said bicycle—fourthly simple assault in that you did assault Angus McIntoon, a Constable of the Crummockshire Constabulary by striking him a severe blow on the arm and shoulder with said bicycle. And I'm to state that anything you say will be taken down and used in evidence against ye."

Digby's blood was up, far up. Furthermore, he came from a country where a certain amount of give and take, even abuse, is recognised in exchanges with police officers—not that Digby was the kind of man who was ever rude to anyone. But to have a list of verbatim charges reeled off at you in that self-righteous gloating Scotch voice, that coming on top of the shock and everything else was the last straw.

"Listen, flatfoot!" he snarled, eloquent even in rage. "Don't you try any Gestapo tricks on me. I am a free man and an American citizen. I may as well add for your information that if you so much as raise that bludgeon I see in your right hand, I shall not be responsible for my actions."

"Will you come quiet?" said the relentless constable, moving closer and raising his bludgeon. "Or will I need to put the handcuffs on ye?" He put his left hand out to grasp Digby by the shoulder.

Now, for the first time, one of many recent firsts, but by far the most disastrous. Now for the first time Digby P. Ross, man of peace, prominent executive, humanist, saw the red beacon of fury before his eyes. He parried the left hand, ducked, took a heavy and painful baton blow on his own left shoulder, but he was inside the policeman's guard. He was a strong man, unskilled in fisticuffs, and he might have botched his blow. He did not. The upper-cut travelled only a few inches past silver buttons to the long chin. It was a beautiful grunting punch. It would have done credit to a sober professional. It lifted McIntoon a couple of inches off his booted feet.

Even as Digby saw his adversary sag and topple backwards, he saw also the enormity of what he had done. This was not running

a policeman down because you feared to stop; this was deliberately assaulting the law in the execution of its duty. " Oh, my God! " he muttered just before the constable's head thudded against a boulder at the roadside. The man sighed and lay still.

Digby knelt beside him. The heart, the heartbeat? No heartbeat. Oh, but there was. Slow, regular. Well, that was something. He looked round wildly. His first instinct was to get on Nanny's bicycle and beat it to Glendrogan while there yet was chance of escape. A lesser man might have done just that. But here was a fellow creature in distress. Both code and compassion made peremptory command.

Accordingly, Digby seized the unconscious McIntoon by the shoulders, pulled him to a sitting position, remembered the fireman's lift learned and practised often as a volunteer when they lived on Long Island, somehow heaved him up like a long blue sack of potatoes in the prescribed fashion, and staggered along the road. The bludgeon or baton dangled from a slack wrist, tapped futile little taps on Digby's thigh at each step. *I've killed the guy*, he thought. *I've killed him.* He saw an awful picture of himself standing in the dock for murder, taking the death sentence like a man.

But soon he was too tired to think of anything except not to fall, and another step and another, now at the corner leading to the village, where he had been the first day and remembered a blue police sign on the right opposite the post office. Hardly a village, just a cluster of houses, cottages on either side of church and churchyard.

Digby groaned and gasped for breath, fuddled with fumes of Bourbon, tired after the long night. He leaned against a wall to rest. He was pretty well all in. He became aware of a figure lurking, only one figure in the deserted square. It peered, came over with a hand behind its back; peered again. It was a short thick-set man.

" Is yon the pollisman? " he whispered. " Is the bastard deid? "

" Unconscious," Digby panted. " Help me! "

The stranger dropped a long sacked object from his hand. It flapped spasmodically on the road.

" Did ye hit 'im? " he said with awe. " Did ye clock the bugger? "

" Yes," Digby said. Although tormented by anxiety, he was still proud of that punch. " Right on the kisser. Bingo! Come on."

Together they carried McIntoon to his cottage, and propped him against the door. He slept on. Digby knocked.

"This is no the place for me. I'll need to be away. Whyn't you get off yer marks while the goin's good?"

"I guess I'll stay," Digby said. "Thanks a lot for helping."

"Man," said the stranger. "Man, I'm fair proud o' ye. I'd like fine to have seen yon punch, a braw blow struck for the glen." He looked at the constable's inert body and spat. "If ye're needin' evidence, Donny Cleghorn's the name. Just send word what I'm to say." He slipped off as quietly as a cat. He was a natural traveller by night.

Footsteps and the door opened. McIntoon fell inward at the feet of a sleepy youngish woman in a wrapper. She gasped.

"Mrs. McIntoon," Digby said. Was that the name? "I'm afraid your husband got hurt. I'll help you in with him."

"Aye up in the middle o' the nicht," she grumbled, grasping her man's shoulders. "Aye tryin' to catch folk. I tellt him. I says, *McIntoon, one o' these fine days ye'll be found wi' a bullet in yer back.* But would he listen? Och no, just went on poking his long neb in ither folk's business."

"He hit his head," Digby explained to this unexpected ally. "I don't *think* it can be very bad."

"A muckle lump like a pullet's egg," said Mrs. McIntoon. She was a nice fat comely woman. "But the heart's strong. Och, he'll be fine. Are you the American gentleman I was hearin' about?" She took a wet cloth and squeezed it over her husband's face.

"Yes," Digby said. American? Yes. Gentleman? No. He watched the constable on the settee in the kitchen. It was hot. His breath was coming back, but he was very tired.

The man stirred, moaned, muttered "Assault" distinctly, shook his head, and sat up straight. His gaze wavered then focused on Digby: "Now, will ye come quiet?"

"I've come," Digby said, vastly relieved. "I'm here. I carried you home." He was quite ready to let bygones be bygones. He had more than made up for what he had done. However he added: "Sshorry, officer. Quite unintentional."

The handcuffs clinked as McIntoon drew them from his pocket.

"Angus!" cried Mrs. McIntoon. "Dinna be daft. What'll the Currnel say, and this American gentleman the Currnel's guest up at the Bighoose?"

"I'm no carin' what the Colonel says. I'm doin' my duty as an Officer of the law assaulted in the execution of his duty." He went across the room. "I arrest you . . ."

"Arrest away," Digby said, holding out his wrists. "Do your worst, you miserable cop. If that's your idea of justice, shertainly arrest me and take the consequences."

"It's you'll take the consequences." McIntoon adjusted the handcuffs, staggered slightly, shook his head.

"Okay," Digby said calmly. "I see you have a telephone. Put me through at once to the American Consul."

"I'll do no such thing."

"McIntoon. Let the gentleman use the phone!"

"Quiet, wumman!"

"I am aware of my rights," Digby said. "As an arrested American citizen I have the right of immediate access to the representative of my country. I demand that right."

The Constable shook his head. "No when inebriated," he said judiciously.

"Am I drunk, Mrs. McIntoon?"

"Sober as a Minister. I'll swear it on the Bible." Mrs. McIntoon had had a hard life being wedded to relentless bigotry. She did not know why she turned now finally against her husband after all these years except that he had been worse than ever lately and she liked the looks of this handsome American who had carried McIntoon home on his back. It was true he smelled strongly of whisky and his eyes were a wee bit glazed. But drunk? No! Mrs. McIntoon had been a pariah in too many places through no fault of her own. She jumped right over her Rubicon. "I'll take the oath in court," she said.

"Two against one," said Digby. Three actually if what he remembered about somebody else outside was right but he wasn't quite sure in the middle of everything. "Now will you get my Consul? I shall be pleased to pay for the call."

"First the particklers," said Constable McIntoon, licking his pencil.

After the laborious taking of particulars there was a long wait while male voices sounded on the telephone from trunks here and trunks there and trunks the next place, and Mrs. McIntoon warmed the teapot. Her husband kept muttering to himself. His head ached; he would make her pay for this; nobody had ever hit him before; he was beginning to be uneasy.

Digby, too, had doubts, not of the righteousness of his cause, but because something was happening to him minute by minute in the hot kitchen, had happened—he was not going to make sense on the telephone. He tried planning sentences and then forgot what they were about before he was half-way through. What a fool I am, he thought. But it was too late.

The Consul of the United States was sleepy. He was also bored. He had met these two in the interval of a concert. *Come on back for a drink after: why don't you?* he said because they were personable people and celebrities as well. So they had come back, Cyrus Becker and Carmen Graves. That was four hours ago. Since then he had been privileged to watch his liquor dwindle and to listen to reminiscences of North Africa, Sicily, Salerno, Avranches, Paris, the Bulge. They were crossing the Remagen bridge in a jeep together at this moment with Jules their pet French Maquis boy who was such a red-hot cook, Jules and a live liberated goose and another correspondent who turned out to be yellow. Most of Germany lay ahead; after that the Pacific. The end of the war was in sight, the end of this conversation not, and you might think that wars in which some people had to do their dull duty as Consuls in South American Republics, you might think wars were fought not for Democracy but for the enjoyment of a few glamorous heels writing phoney dispatches and still abusing hospitality by endless talk about it years and years later at three-fifteen in the morning, for God's sake.

" Let me give you a fill up, Miss Graves," he suggested politely.

She nodded her sleek head. They said she was the toughest and most fearless one of the whole lot, which was annoying too. " Cy darling, do you remember that boy with his arms shot off at the elbow and the wrist who asked me to hold his hand because I

reminded him of his girl in Butte, Montana? Do you remember the piece I wrote about that poor kid?"

"Sure I remember it. That was right up your alley."

He put Miss Graves's glass on the table beside her. "Telephone," she said, before he heard it. She went on talking.

Who would call him this late? Unless it was trouble. "Excuse me," to his unheeding guests, and went out to the hall.

"Yes?" he said guardedly.

"Is this the American Consul?"

"Who wants him?"

"Police Constable Mcsomething at Blub-blub Crummockshire," the voice said. It was hard enough to understand them face to face, but on the phone! Mumble mumble mumble. Something about an American citizen in custody, wanting to talk.

He sighed. "Consul speaking. Put him on the line."

"Are you the United States Consul?"

"Speaking," he said again. He was a patient man; he had to be.

"This is Digby P. Ross of New York City. I am preshently visiting in the Highlands. I need your help. Can you hear me?"

He could hear him perfectly well. He had this guy ticketed and more or less located already. (*a*) He had been drinking, (*b*) he spoke with that clipped high-hat Boston-Harvard accent which never failed to prickle the Consul, a man from Springfield, Illinois. "Go on, Mr. Ross."

"I have been unjustly arrested. I am bicycling home peacefully when this constable asshaults me at this bridge. He knocks me off. I fall heavily. When I pick myself up he arrests me for a dozen offences I have not committed. It's absolutely outrageous, Mr. Consul. Then I look after this constable. I carry him myself on my own back to his house where he arrests me again and clicks on these handcuffs if you please, and says I'm held for court to-morrow. It is a travesty of justice. I know my rights, Mr. Consul, and I demand these rights. As a law-abiding man I expect the law to abide by me even in this heathen country or I will know the reason why and so will my Congressman. Can you hear me, Mr. Consul?"

"Take it easy, Mr. Ross. Don't shout. You didn't *hit* the policeman, did you?"

"I may have barried his plows in self-defence. More than that certainly not. I am all alone by myself in some severe trouble Mr. Consul without a friend except that Mrs. McIntoon the cop's wife has been kindness itself and I should be ungrateful if I did not pay due acknowledgment to a gracious lady. Thank you, Mrs. McIntoon."

You could almost see the sozzled play-boy bum bowing at the end of the line.

"What charges are being preferred against you?"

"No lights is one. To that alone I plead guilty due to a most unfortunate chain of circumstances, no fault of mine. Breach of said peace is two. Drunk and disorderly in charge of said vehicle is three. Assaulting said Constable is four. I don't know how many more he is thinking up at this very moment. I, Digby P. Ross, demand your protection, Mr. Consul."

"Now, listen," said the Consul. Every now and then his patience wore thin. This was one time. "Listen to me, Mr. Ross. First, you are entitled to the same protection as any other American citizen, neither more nor less. Second, it is my duty not only to serve the interests of Americans but also to serve the best interests of the United States. It is my opinion that you have been drinking. I am in no position to know the whys and wherefores of these charges you describe in such garbled fashion. But I *am* in a position to respect the administration of the Law in Scotland. Third, there is nothing I can do for you at this time of night even if I wanted to. It's not my job or my intention to help Americans make exhibitions of themselves." He was being rude, but you had to be rude to get it over to a guy in this condition. "Will you listen to my advice?"

Long silence. Finally: "I am ready to hear your advice." Pompous, dignified.

"Okay. Sleep it off, Mr. Ross, right where you are in the police station and don't make any more trouble. If you want legal aid call me in the morning. Lastly, bear in mind, if you can bear anything in mind, that you might get off easier if you decided to plead guilty. Now let me speak to the police constable again."

He found out the name of the place, hung up and went back to the sitting-room. They were still in Germany, but Carmen Graves stopped talking as he came in. "Lordy," she said, looking at her

watch. "Twenty minutes of four. You must think we're very rude, Mr. Carling, talking so much and staying so late. But we've hardly seen one another from those days to this. You know what it is."

"Of course," he said. He liked her again. "I could listen all night to you people talk." And then, because it was the kind of thing that would amuse them, he said: "You should have heard the phone conversation I just had. Some American guy in trouble up Crummock way. He socked a cop. Then he wondered why Mr. Digby P. Ross should be in gaol for assault and being higher'n a kite. Pompous as hell. Polite though, I must say."

"What did you say his name was?" Cy Becker asked, leaning forward.

"Digby P. Ross. He might have been President of the United States from the way he went on. Why? You don't know him, do you?"

"I know a Digby P. Ross. He was in my class at Harvard. A nice guy even if he is the perfect specimen of American manhood. President of the Ross Corporation these last five years. Did this one say where he came from?"

"New York City," said the Consul. "But his accent certainly fits your label. Not ugly drunk—just very high, as I said. President of the Ross Corporation! My God, do you think this could be him? Why didn't he say so?"

"He wouldn't," said Becker. "It's the sort of damn' silly thing he would or wouldn't say."

"Is the Ross Corporation that big construction outfit?" Carmen asked.

"Big! With the subsidiary companies it's just about the biggest in America. You know what I think, my old she-shanty?" Which had been his sickening name for her late at night in the good jeep days. "What I think is we'd better check up on this Ross. If it is the same one, and I can hardly believe that's possible because the Digby I know is just about the soberest most respectable stuffed-shirt in the world, then you and I might find something better to do with our expense accounts to-morrow, to-day. What say you to a pocket-sized scoop?"

"I say go call your night-desk."

Becker got his transatlantic call right away; it took them about one minute to find out. He came back. "It's him," he said. "The very same. Flew over the other day. Come on, Carmen!"

"Just a minute," she said, and smiled on the Consul: "Mr. Carling. Could you tell us what he said? We don't want to go all that way for nothing."

If Ross had only disclosed that he was likely to be news value when he hit policemen, then the Consul might have given him a break and not told this pair of vultures. Well, it was the man's own fault. He repeated what little he had gathered from the garbled account of Digby P. Ross.

"It might be a story," she said doubtfully. "Just might, depending on how he pleads. Is he a Republican, Cy?"

"Sure he's a Republican."

"Okay then. You can drive and I'll curl up beside you not that I can ever sleep in a car, even with you, Cy Cy."

"Couldn't you pretend you were crossing Germany again in your old jeep?" suggested Mr. Carling, the Consul. "Together with the red-hot cook and the liberated goose." He was a bit fed up at the way they drank his liquor and used him and cast him off. Also he envied the wacky life they led.

"You mustn't mind us," Carmen said. You knew she was turning it on for the umpteenth time, but you fell for it. Everybody did. "Thank you so much, Mr. Carling. I shan't forget your kindness, and promise you won't forget to look me up next time you're in Washington. Good-bye, now."

CHAPTER TEN

THROUGH THE DOOR he could hear the measured mumble of policemen, the protestations of offenders, the tramp and shuffle of feet, words now and then in that voice which had beguiled him through ecstatic hours, had sped him on his way, had, by rare anomaly, come here to judge him. He heard these sounds. Above and through them in hectoring mastery came the tones of Colonel Galbraith.

Digby's throbbing head was buried in his hands. Can it be me? he thought. Can it be I who kicked over my connubial traces and drank far far too much, and socked a policeman and called up our Consul?

He was unshaven. His hair—with the iron-grey patches at the temples so distinguished Madeleine used to say damn her, all her fault—was a mop. His shirt was grubby. He had hardly slept because first the ceiling and the barred windows heaved and swung; then if he shut his eyes, the flashing pink and purple darkness heaved and swung, and he had had to sit up on a hard pallet in the lock-up in Constable McIntoon's house to fight nauseating waves of vertigo. When they did subside, self-reproach stormed up to take their place. In the vague sozzled panoply of recollection, one thing stood out. This was the Consul's advice: *You might get off easier if you decided to plead guilty.*

But it was not of his own fate that Digby had thought while the sun climbed and birds sang morning mockery beyond the bars. He reviled himself because, in bemused intransigence he had forgotten the welfare of Fiona, the matchless diamond of her reputation. He had realised too late, almost too late, perhaps not quite too late, that if he made any kind of fuss, the rest of the story would come out,

that if he contested these charges—just or unjust—he would be cross-examined as to his prior movements. *You deny you were drunk. Where had you been, then? With whom had you been? What had you been doing?*

This realisation had hit his aching head with the impact of a sledge-hammer. You miserable heel, he thought, repaying a glorious woman's kindness with betrayal. There and then he had resolved to plead guilty.

The Consul had telephoned at ten. Digby had refused legal aid. Mrs. McIntoon, a staunch good woman, had renewed her offer to take the oath on his behalf against her husband. *I am deeply grateful, Mrs. McIntoon, but I have decided that I was drunk, unquestionably drunk.* He had refused bail, and had been driven, still in the custody of McIntoon, by Lord Balgersho in his own closed Cadillac convertible, to the Court of the Justices of the Peace at the grey town of Crummock.

This day, begun in glory, had grown to be the blackest of his life. He had disgraced his name; he had let down his country; but far worse: he had been within an ace of betraying a man's most sacred trust.

Digby groaned. Then he sat up straight. He was going to look them in the eye. He was going to show these people he could take it. Through the closed door he heard the Colonel's truculent words of condemnation, bearing out Balgersho's remark as they drove along: *I say, old boy, I don't want to depress you, but Galbraith's a tyrant on the Bench, a hanging judge if ever there was one.*

" Fetch him in! "

The door opened. A policeman waggled a large forefinger, menace in that silent gesture of summons. Digby stood up, squared his shoulders and walked into the crowded courtroom towards a sea of red Scots faces, bucolic faces staring at him.

" No! No, man! " said the Colonel harshly. " Not down there. You're no spectator. You are an accused person here to make acquaintance with the law. Put the prisoner in the dock."

Digby was hustled into the dock. He could not resist looking once at Fiona. To-day she wore a coat and skirt of her tartan, a plain white blouse, a green velvet beret—severely dressed for the

judicial function. She was the loveliest lady magistrate in the whole wide world, studying a pencil in her hand. So cool and fresh and healthy after a good night's rest. She's twice the man I am, Digby thought sadly.

"Is this an American?" rapped the Colonel. The three large Band-aids dotted his left cheek. He wore pince-nez low on his nose. He looked over them at Digby, coldly contemptuous.

"Yes, Your Honour," said the Clerk of the Court, nervous, fussing with papers.

"Hurry up, then! Read the charges. We haven't got all day to waste on one miscreant."

But as the Clerk of the Court cleared his throat to begin, the door on the far side of the room opened and a man and woman burst in. It was so sudden, so dramatic, that every eye in court, including Digby's, turned to stare at the intruders.

They stood there, wholly at ease, and they looked slowly—with the same raffish quizzical yet intent expression on both their faces—right round the room, taking in the Colonel, dwelling on Fiona, coming to rest on Digby. They were unmistakably Americans; their presence gave fleeting comfort and encouragement to him until he recognised the man, a classmate far away and long ago, a famous correspondent, a likeable four-flusher named Cy Becker. Digby's brains were working slow, but it did not take him more than one hissing inhalation to realise the meaning of Becker's precipitate arrival.

"Hiya, Digby!" called Becker, waving his hand. "Sorry to see you in a spot."

"Order in the Court!" thundered the Colonel, standing up, "I will not tolerate communication with the accused. What is the meaning of this interruption, you Sir, and you Madam?"

Becker murmured to his companion. She was a sweet-looking, soft-featured soignée woman. She smiled and said in the hush: "My Lord, we apologise for breaking into the proceedings. We are American correspondents. This is Cyrus Becker and I am Carmen Graves. May we sit down in court, My Lord?" She had the kind of voice that lulls fretful babies.

It lulled the Colonel. "Certainly," he said. "Pray do be seated.

I accord you welcome to our public court. We have no secrets here, least of all from representatives of our great sister Nation and staunch ally. Now proceed!"

The Clerk of the Court read. Digby had forgotten Constable McIntoon's extempore wording in the night; but hearing these charges now, he remembered. They were identical in substance—no lights, breach of the peace, drunk, assault.

"Are you guilty or not guilty on the first charge?"

"I plead guilty on all four counts, Your Honour," Digby said loudly. He looked the Colonel in the eye; but he was not seeing the Colonel; he was seeing a dryad dance with gay abandon on the lawn. No murmur must sully the reputation of that other Justice who sat so gravely by her senior on the bench.

"Hmmmmm! You realise the import of a plea of guilty?"

"I do, Your Honour."

"You realise that the Bench has no alternative in that case but to award just punishment?"

"I do, Your Honour."

"Is there a statement by the Police Officer?"

This was produced, and McIntoon swore to its accuracy. He wore such an air of lugubrious smugness in the witness box that Digby felt a resurgence—sober now and perhaps more deadly—of the rage which had gripped him at the bridge. But he forced it down.

The Colonel read the statement aloud. McIntoon stated on oath that Digby had wrested the baton from his hand and struck him with it.

"That isn't true," Digby expostulated. "I knocked him down with a perfectly fair punch on the jaw, and he hit his head on a stone. I never touched his baton."

The Colonel rounded on him. "Silence! I will not have the proceedings of the court dominated by an accused person. Is there such a thing as a *fair* punch against a Police Officer in the execution of his duty? And I would remind you, Ross, that in this country, at least, there are no fancy shades of guilt or innocence. You plead the one, or you plead the other. Which is it?"

Digby swallowed. "Guilty," he said.

"The case is closed. Before the Bench decides on sentence, my

colleague and I will have certain questions to put. Towards a citizen of our great ally we wish to display such leniency as is concomitant with the maintenance of law and order in this peaceful community. Have you any explanation to offer for your conduct?"

"None, Your Honour."

"Come, come, man! Do not act the dolt. Was there no ameliorating circumstance in your Rake's Progress? How did it happen that you were riding or trying to ride a bicycle in this deplorable condition at 2.30 a.m.? What had you been celebrating? Where had you been?"

He knows damn' well where I'd been, Digby thought. What's the little swine trying to do? Aloud he said: "I have no statement to make, Your Honours."

There was now an interruption from the back of the spectators' ranks. A short square man was standing. He wore an expression both sheepish and extremely determined. "Currnel," he called.

The Colonel thumped for silence. "Who is it? What is it?" he demanded, peering over his pince-nez, "Oh it's you, Donny. Now look here, Donny Cleghorn, how many times am I to tell you people that when I sit here as a Justice on this bench, I have no personal identity? I am not Colonel this or Colonel that, your neighbour. I am the instrument of the LAW, impartial, anonymous. I *am* the Law." He glared all round the Court, challenging anyone to contradict this noble affirmation. As Digby had thought yesterday, a century ago, the Colonel was a lot of fat little man in one fat little man—his judicial personality certainly not the least obnoxious. "Well, what is it, Donny?"

"Your Honour, I was roused up by a clatter o' footsteps in the night and I rose from ma' bed and went outben. The accused was carryin' the Constable hame on his ane back just as easy as a bairn. The accused was nae mair drunk than the Currnel is at this minute. I never heard tell yet o' a drunk body able to carry anither body on his back."

"How dare you interrupt with testimony!" snarled the Colonel. "You have not been called as witness. For once we do not invite your presence in this court, Cleghorn."

"I ken that fine, sir." The man looked mulish, mutinous. "But

I ken justice too, or the lack. So I says to masel: I'll say my say whatever it costs me."

Donny Cleghorn sat down. There was a ripple of whispers in the courtroom, but that died when Digby said firmly: "I was drunk. There is no question of it. Thank you for your kind intention, sir." He bowed to the short man, sitting again now at the back. More throaty rumbles from the audience. They all hate me, he thought, every one of them except that guy Cleghorn, who is perhaps an outcast too. Then he glanced at the front row where Cy Becker and the woman correspondent were seated one on either side of Balgersho, whispering to him and across him, and Balgersho wearing his most indolently diabolical expression. All three looked from Digby to the bench where Fiona twirled a thoughtful pencil in between and through her slim fingers. She was serene. She was the stable member of this Bench. I wonder if she remembers, Digby thought, or does she have the power of shutting herself, her own life, away completely when she becomes a magistrate? A particularly painful throb from the peak of brow down through to the nape of neck made him shiver and move his head again to find that the correspondents were watching him with the lively interest of a pair of anatomy students dissecting a frog.

But the Colonel was speaking. "The Court ignores that interruption," he said, and turned to Fiona: "Have you any questions to ask the accused?"

She nodded with a lustre of auburn hair under the sleek green beret. "Just one," and looked at Digby across the gulf, the ocean, from Bench to Dock. "Is it all right or is it frowned on I mean to hit policemen in America?"

Digby gulped. "It is frowned upon, Your Honour."

A distinct titter from the front row. The Colonel smashed down his gavel. "Order in the Court!"

He coughed and stood up, a bald, moustached, egg-shaped puce-faced little beast of a magistrate or hanging judge if ever there was one. "Before the Bench passes sentence, I feel it my duty to address certain observations to you, D. P. Ross, confessed miscreant. Let us consider your offences one by one. We need not dwell long upon the matter of riding a bicycle without lights. If, in less developed tracts and countries elsewhere there may be a slackness, a casual

disregard for road safety, such cannot be tolerated in our crowded island. Here we are many and we hold life dear.

"So much for that. Now, you have admitted, in accepting Constable McIntoon's statement, that you disturbed the peace not only by shouting and singing but also by the utterance of war cries such as *FIGHT, FIGHT, FIGHT*. It may be that this aggressive behaviour is customary in your homeland. It is certainly not the custom in our law-abiding community.

"Next as to drunkenness. You admit intoxication. You have refused to tell the court how it was that you became drunk, whether you drank secretly sip by sip on your lurching cycle ride, whether you were led astray by publicans, or met with bad company at some low house. We do not know. We dare not surmise. We can say only that alcohol, which is the friend and enemy of man, is your enemy. Eschew it, Ross! Shun it at any rate for the remainder of your sojourn here in our temperate Highlands. What you do in America is not our affair; let me repeat only the counsel I myself received as a newly-joined subaltern in India, counsel that I have never forgotten—*If you cannot drink like a gentleman, do not drink!*

"And lastly the matter of assault, by far the most serious of your offences." The Colonel paused to take a sip of water.

Digby stared at him. He could hardly believe it. Was the little monster really delivering this insulting homily? Keep calm, remember Fiona, keep calm, remember Fiona! he adjured himself time and again.

"You are here as the guest of Scotland, Ross. For how long I do not know. We, all of us wherever you have been, have held out the hand of hospitality, the olive-branch of friendship, and when I say that this is not lip-service, lightly given, I feel sure that your fellow-Americans, whom we gladly welcome in this court to-day, will bear me out as to the warmth of Scotland's heart." He paused, and the correspondents, who were now leaning forward, pencils arrested in rapt attention, nodded their heads vigorously.

"What have you done in return? You meet a Police Officer at a bridge in the early hours of the morning. In the zealous and courteous execution of his duty, he calls upon you to halt. Do you halt? No sir, you ride him down like a wild beast. You then attack him

ferociously, wrest away his baton, strike him to the ground. We are not used to Gangster methods here. We are peaceful people. But there are limits to our patience. If forced to it we shall not hesitate to take drastic action against these alien incursions. We are proud of our freedom from the law of the hoodlum.

" In passing sentence, the court will take into consideration that you are a stranger to our way of life, that this is your first offence, that severity has never been Scotland's heritage."

He sat down to confer with Fiona. Apart from this whispering, there was a dead absolute hush in Court, Digby struggled with himself. Red anger glowed. " Control! " he muttered. " Control! " But control was flying up high to the rafters.

" The accused will stand. . . . It is within our power to sentence you to fines totalling thirty pounds or four months' imprisonment, but for the reason I have given, we do not intend to be harsh." The Colonel paused and rapped it out: " Twenty pounds or three months."

" Oh! Ooohh! Aaahh! " long drawn out from every corner of the Court. One voice only, " It's a bluidy shame! "

" Order in the Court! Who said that? Was it you, Cleghorn? " No answer.

Digby clenched the wooden railing in front of him. He couldn't help it. No, he couldn't. " Whoever said that spoke the truth! " he shouted. " Justice! Take a look at this miserable elongated apology for a policeman. Just look at him! " He pointed his trembling finger at Constable McIntoon sitting on the other side. " The man's a byword. Everyone knows that, even I know it. Day after day and night after night he prowls around trying to make criminals of innocent people. Then he perjures himself. No wonder they call him the Stinker." Digby paused for breath. He had them all stunned. A dim memory gave him ammunition. " Drunk I may have been slightly, but I am glad indeed that I struck this blow for the honest people of the glen. Yes, I am very very glad." He turned to the Colonel who was visibly paler. " I shall not pay one cent of a fine. I shall go to jail for three months. and proudly, very very proudly as a gesture against tyranny. As for you . . ." But strong arms were seizing him. He had blown his top. He did not struggle—glared only at the Colonel and saw Fiona whisper and heard him say

weakly, " Court adjourned for five minutes "—as he was led back to the cell.

" Man," said the sergeant inside. " There's no grudge against ye in the Force. It was high time somebody learned yon McIntoon a lesson."

" Thanks," said Digby. He sat down.

They went away, closed the door, locked it. Then the key rasping again. He turned. It was Fiona. She came over lithely, conspiratorially, put her hand on his shoulder: " Digby darling, what terribly bad luck. You do understand I couldn't say anything don't you, Digby? "

" 'Course," he muttered. " That was the whole point."

" But Digby darling please don't go to prison. Please pay the fine even if it is a big one, Digby."

He shook his head. " I won't pay. Grossly unjust."

" Oh but Digby I need you for the Gathering I do need you terribly to help me and make the speech you promised and specially now because of your name and everything oh Digby I promise to be nice to you don't let me down don't cast me away out like a clout." All this in a torrent of words in the golden voice which dazed him.

Had he promised to make a speech? " It's the principle of the thing," he persisted. " It's that cop and that goddam little gargoyle preaching sermons. . . ."

" Just for me, Digby. Please, please, please." She rubbed her cheek against his bristles.

" Okay then." He couldn't resist her. He never had been able to resist wheedling women, Madeleine or any of them. Oh, Madeleine!

" Hallo," said a voice. They turned. The flash bulb blinded him. " Thanks a lot." It was Carmen Graves, smiling sweetly.

" Now, look here! " growled Digby, jumping up. But she had gone. Fiona went too. He was called in. " I'll pay," he said, and did so on the spot to the Clerk of the Court with four white English bills, not Scottish.

As Digby stalked alone to the door of freedom he noticed that the court was now entirely empty except for Justices of the Peace,

policemen, petty offenders and officials. He stepped outside and walked, to his astonishment, between cheering ranks of rustic Highlanders. "Yon was braw!" they cried. "Man, yon's changed my opinion o' the Yanks. Man, I'm proud o' ye. Guid worrk, mon! Och, I'd hae gi'en a week's wage for to see ye punch thon holy bugger. Guid laddie, Digby!" laughing and shouting and slapping him on the back. He forced himself to smile, and then when he had smiled, found himself suddenly loving these common people who saw in him a Galahad, a saviour from the tyranny of McIntoon. Life wasn't quite so bad until he came to Balgersho, Cy Becker and Miss Graves, in a small group at the Cadillac.

"Stout effort, old boy," said Balgersho.

"I didn't know you had it in you, Digby," said Cy with some admiration.

"Oh, you didn't? Well, you know now." He pushed past them to get into the driving-seat.

"Mr. Ross. Will you give me a little background material? How you came to be . . ."

"I will give you nothing, period."

"You dined with Miss Kilburnie, didn't you?"

"Boy, is that a dish," said Cy. "Is that a *filet mignon*!"

"Shut up, you!" He came back.

Which was what Becker wanted to know. He retreated. "Look," he said. "Why not let us in on this? It's a story, Digby, and you know it. Give us the dope and maybe we can give you a break."

Digby's mood was coldly dangerous. He had been tried too far. But there was one thing: "Let me have the film out of that camera; then I might change my mind. Not that there's anything to tell. Miss Kilburnie, a magistrate, was advising me to pay the fine rather than serve my sentence. Do you call that a story?"

"It depends how well you know her," Miss Graves said softly. "But I couldn't give you the roll, Mr. Ross. I couldn't possibly. It isn't fair to ask me."

"Go to hell then," Digby said. He slammed the door and started the motor. Balgersho said hasty good-byes, got in beside him. They drove off.

"I say, Digby," said Balgersho after an interval. "It's none of

my business, but I don't think it was very wise of you to put their backs up."

Increased speed; no answer.

"You're not annoyed with me, are you, old boy? I didn't do a thing."

"How come they knew I dined at the Birks, then?"

"They hadn't been in Court five minutes before they leaned across me and agreed there was only one explanation for all this noble funny business and demure looks, their very words."

"What put them on to coming in the first instance?"

"Because they were at the American Consul's when you telephoned. Bad luck, I must admit."

"So then you mentioned you had borrowed my car?"

"What else could I do, my dear chap? I'm only a simple citizen. I didn't know it was a secret."

"There wasn't any secret. We sat up late talking, and I guess I did drink a bit too much. I didn't want it to reflect on Fiona, was all." Digby laughed harshly. It was a nasty sound. "As for you being a simple citizen!"

"Now now, old boy, easy does it. I'm not taking umbrage, which I might well. What are your plans for the rest of the day?"

"I shall pack my bags and leave at once. I've had my fill. When I think of that Anglo-Indian manatee daring to read me a lecture, all I can say is thank God I don't belong in this hypocritical country. I don't want any part of it."

Hamish Balgersho shifted uncomfortably. "In that mood he's an impossible little four-letter man. A bit cuckoo, you know, Digby. He went completely berserk in court. A pity you didn't frighten the wits out of him earlier. But you'll see; he'll come home loving you dearly. I tell you what. Why don't we try and mend my old kite and I'll take you for a flip to clear the cobwebs and promote second thoughts?"

Digby grunted.

"My God, Digby, you can't leave us just when you've settled that Bobby's hash. Mark my words, he's a sorely shaken man. It may have been a trifle expensive, but you're the most popular chap in the Glen at this moment."

"I wonder if he was getting his own back on me for peppering him," Digby said, feeling a little less awful until he thought of the story Cy Becker and the sob sister would send home, and the picture, my God the picture, if it came out.

Hamish laughed. "I wouldn't put it past him." Life and death, love and hate, honour and treachery—the whole drama seemed to be a good joke to Lord Balgersho. He changed the subject. "How did you get on with Queenie."

"I had a very nice evening."

"I bet she soaked you good and proper for the Gathering. At what stage of the proceedings did she pop that question?"

Don't let him rile you! Seem innocent, perfectly innocent! "I did offer to make a small contribution," Digby said lightly. "I think it was when we went up to the roof to see the amphitheatre. What a magnificent view it is!"

"Splendid!" said Hamish. "And were you also privileged to view those bloody little dolls of hers?"

"No," Digby said, puzzled, coming on. "No. I don't think I remember any dolls."

"Hmmm," said Balgersho. "Even to see them is a special mark of favour, never accorded to me I may say dammit. Perhaps you'll be wearing a little kilt one of these days, Digby. You never know your luck." He glanced round at him.

"You never do," Digby said. He saw an absurd proud image of himself standing with one clawed foot on the feathers of a prostrate Balgersho, and crowing, yes crowing.

"Life is full of ups and downs," he remarked. "Life is full of dolls and clowns."

"You're exceedingly good value as a chap," Hamish said after he had stopped laughing. "I wish you'd settle here for keeps. Feeling any better?"

"Some," Digby said. This Balgersho did make him feel better for the moment, but he knew that the back-log of remorse bided its time.

"I have a very efficient salmon fisheries scheme—company floated and everything—but we need more working capital. Would you be interested in a good investment? I could fly you over this afternoon."

They were in sight of the plane, which stood in a small grass field.

"I contribute on occasion," Digby said. "I donate. I have even been known unwillingly to lend. In such matters I fear I am a sucker. But when it comes to investing capital, Hamish, I ought to warn you that I am utterly cold-blooded."

"Always the perfect little gent, though, I'll bet," said Hamish.

You did not know if you esteemed him, and you did not know if he esteemed you; but with this one too you were evolving a technique. Only with the adorable wayward Fiona, beauty, croquet-player, chieftainess, shot, trencher-woman, jill-tar, raconteuse, mighty drinker, magistrate, nightingale, Scottish Nationalist, highland dancer and lover—only with her would technique ever be a mockery. Thank God for that. Can I see her this evening? Can I?

Digby was a proud man, but he saw now in vivid revelation that he must sink his pride. He could not very well stay at the Birks. He could not stay with this snake Balgersho and be spied on by a thwarted rival. There was only one way he could go on seeing Fiona. *He must not quarrel with the Colonel.* He sighed.

"Cheer up, chum."

"I was thinking," Digby mused. "I was just thinking that mighty queer things seem to have happened to me in body and soul since I came to Scotland."

They cleared the choked fuel-pipe. They flew in the afternoon.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I COULDN'T really with Olaf and Helmut in the apartment. It would be playing into Digby's hands for evidence and everything. *That's Craig Proctor with Madeleine Ross. Look how attentive he is. Look how she makes him laugh.* La belle dame sans merci hath thee in thrall. A quarter of ten. I must get up soon.

You can't expect Craig to be like other people. You can't expect genius to be ordinary. Nature gives safety valves to the creative spirit. I must remember that; it expresses the truth so exactly.

Digby never had the faintest idea of what love was all about, the truth of it—the battle and the hatred of it in Craig's words. He was just so considerate and polite and perfect always until I could have screamed. But, of course, that conventional perfection was the kind of man he is or was, so dull except for the last evening when he attacked me and said those awful things like *it's your only job*, and like *you're a spoilt selfish stupid little woman.* Oh, he was so horrible. I wonder how he is. I must just read my letter again. Where did I put the rough copy? Here in my brown bag.

But if I have failed—and any woman must look on the wreckage of her marriage as a failure—I am finding a sanctuary of loneliness now—opportunities to browse over the old books, to contemplate, to think of the meanings of life, to realise with pain that our time together was a mockery. Please understand that I am not bitter. I ask only that we come graciously to the parting of our ways.

That must have given Digby pause, if he ever got it. I suppose he got it. I wonder if it brought tears to his eyes for a moment realising what he had done to me. What *did* he do to me? Now be quiet. You know he was just horrible, unforgivably horrible. I'm

going to pack up all my things to-day and to-morrow. Oh dear, so many things which are his things and my things, whose things? Then I will decide about Craig and Arizona, Arizona and Craig, before Reno or after Reno.

The telephone. How nice to hear the phone ring. It's sure to be Polly. It was sweet of her to drive me down from Maine. "Hallo."

"Madeleine!"

"Polly, darling!" What's wrong, I wonder? She sounds excited.

"Madeleine, have you seen it?"

"What?"

"About Digby. It's in the *Express*."

"What about Digby?"

"He's not hurt or anything. Darling, I hardly like to tell you, but they nearly sent him to prison for being drunk and attacking a policeman in Scotland. Madeleine, I do feel for you so much. It's Cyrus Becker's column on page seven, and something by Carmen Graves too on page thirty-one. Darling, this coming on top of everything, it can't help hardening the emotional block. I do feel for you so much. Shall I bring my copy around?"

She feels for me so much. She gloats for me so much. "No thanks, Polly darling. I have a copy right here."

"I thought it was my duty to tell you, Madeleine. If I can do anything, honey, you only have to let me know. Good-bye now."

Where is it? Page seven. Cyrus Becker. I met him twice at the Class Reunion. I didn't like him. Oh!

Wealthy Ross Corporation President Digby P. Ross. . . . Scottish vacation certainly took a lively turn early this morning. . . . Drunk and slugging a cop. . . . Good Heavens! Digby could never do such things. It can't be him. It's impossible. *For reasons best known to himself and likely connected with local peach (some beauteous dish, Fiona Kilburnie—a magistrate, too) Ross determined to plead guilty on all counts, so punishment was coming to him.*

Presiding blimp magistrate spoke hearty welcome to this correspondent and friend, wartime colleague, Carmen Graves; then revealed a staggering anti-American bias amounting to phobia in summing-up, made grossly insulting implications. . . .

We give billions to these people, get nothing but abuse in return. We

have learned not to expect gratitude, but it is reasonable to expect fair treatment for our citizens in British Courts—— Also indication of justice calibre : Chief Hangman Galbraith was Digby Ross's own host—one man presumed likely to be generous ; one man, incidentally, debarred by interest from serving in any law court of any democracy we know. If this is British justice, let's keep our dollars for Americans. . . .

Ross—always known hitherto as the politest of stuffed shirts—showed white-heat at travesty of justice. First shouted he would serve three months' jail sentence. Later persuaded by above magisterial dish to pay twenty pound (fifty-six dollar) fine. All of which does not let Ross off the hook. This drink-sodden ambassador . . . And so on. Oh dear.

Turn to page thirty-one. Carmen Graves. A picture of Digby, haggard, dishevelled, but unmistakably Digby with a woman, him sitting, her right hand on his shoulder, bending over, their faces close, looking into one another's eyes. Beautiful even in a wired picture.

Fiona Kilburnie of the Birks, intime hostess to Digby P. Ross last night, his lovely if faintly embarrassed co-judge to-day, the ' Bonniest lassie in all Scotland,' Chief of her Clan, here gives a woman magistrate's advice to the stricken Ross, says : " Pay fine Digby darling and share freedom's joys. . . ."

Whatever we may think of rich Republican playboys who can't hold their liquor, we do admire a stickler to quixotic guns. This girl and famed Chieftain. Physically a fiery Highland Hayworth and femme fatale, she is . . . etc., etc.

Oh Digby, how could you do that to me, making me a laughing stock more than ever? But this woman! What's her name? Fiona Kilburnie. I can just see her catching you on the rebound and making you fighting drunk on purpose. I could tear her eyes out. Why pretend any more? Why pretend I like Craig Proctor when in my heart of hearts I think he's a sex-ridden intellectual cry-baby? Poor Digby! I must save him from himself. I must get him back. What shall I do?

I know what I'll do right now. I'll call old Randall Johnson. He's so wise. He'll help me. Murray Hill 2-5340.

" Yes? "

" Randall, this is Madeleine Ross."

" Madeleine, my dear child. I didn't know you were in town."

"Did you see about Digby in the *Express*?"

"Yeah. Yes, I did. Awkward, eh? Hmmm."

Typically man and non-committal. "Randall, are you free this morning? You couldn't come round for just a little? Say in half an hour?"

"Always free for you, Madeleine, as you know well. I'll be there."

"Run a bath, Helmut." I think she knows about it from the way she looks. Oscar and Helmut were on his side, or at least she was, Oscar less. Which was the thing Randall liked me in so much? Ancient, but never mind. How could Digby . . .? I wonder what she's like? *A fiery Hayworth.* Nobody ever called me fiery. *Cool, elusive, secret, cerebral beauty* are the sort of things they call me.

"Mr. Proctor rings twice while you are in bath, Mrs. Ross."

"Oh." He can wait.

"Randall, you're so kind to come."

"Not kind, grateful. How nice you look."

My goodness, he's attractive for an older man. He must have simply slayed the women once; perhaps he still has models in discreet apartments; do you think he does?

"Randall, I had to talk to somebody about this awful thing about Digby, and I know you'll understand what a shock it is. When I spoke to you before I hadn't decided what was best to do. Then up in Maine I had an opportunity to think about the meanings of everything. . . ."

Oh dear, it sounds phoney when I say it. It sounds as if I didn't care, and the truth is that I care terribly. Think of the million kind patient things he did which I took for granted and didn't give anything in return. That's what I've been thinking underneath ever since that awful night. But he never gave me a chance, did he? He was such a professional GOOD man till he suddenly went to pieces.

"Randall do you think I should bring Digby back and get him to work with a psychoanalyst? They do achieve wonders. That new man, Langbein, was perfectly marvellous for Molly Panton after her divorce. It's entirely due to him that she and Henry have the most perfect adjustment. But that's beside the point. Do you think I should go to Digby? Do you, Randall?"

Why does he stare out? Why doesn't he answer me? I forgot to offer him a drink, that's probably it. *Always give a glum male a drink*, somebody said. "Can I get you a drink, Randall, Scotch or something?"

"No, no, thanks. I don't believe I will. Madeleine, do you want me to make soothing uncle-noises, or do you want me to say what I really think?"

"Why, what you really think, of course." He's not going to be mean, is he? Not Randall.

"Right then. Let's get one thing straight first. Do you suggest going to Digby, as you put it, in order to make a noble gesture, or simply because you're jealous and you want him back?"

"That's rather a mean thing to say, Randall, considering everything."

"Of course it's mean. Women implore you to give them counsel; then inevitably either they dislike you for it, or they abase themselves about it, both embarrassing. All right then, Madeleine. Do you want to save Digby from himself, or do you want to rescue him from this Scots girl who I must say certainly looks a dish, to use Cyrus Becker's odious expression?"

"Both, Randall. It must be both. Oh, Randall, I've been so unhappy, but I would have gone through with the divorce because I know our marriage has been a failure, and I still will go through with it too, but I suddenly thought this morning particularly when I saw the picture that it was all my fault and I was driving him into another woman's arms and I wanted him desperately for myself just to try once again."

"Jealousy it is, then. Love too, I think and hope. Since I am now in it up to the neck, I will tell you that there are faults on both sides. Digby has always been a knight in shining armour, a good and considerate man, just a bit too damned good to live with. You, on the other hand, have been a model in domestic care and attention, the house always spotless, the food perfect, the taste impeccable—look at this room, I ask you, for a man to feel comfortable in, not that I don't admire it. The one thing you failed to do was the one that mattered: you never identified yourself with Digby's interests. You contrived, perhaps without ever saying so, to let him know that

business was a bore, that his taste in books was a joke, and so on and so on. Dry your eyes, my child, and don't spit at me. I haven't finished.

"It is a total fallacy to imagine that the happy marriage can be one where the man pampers his wife and gives way to her and indulges her every whim. The happy marriage exists only where the man is himself pampered, told how wonderful he is, ostensibly obeyed and worshipped. Regrettable, but true. That American women have joined in a gigantic conspiracy to reverse this natural and inevitable order of things is a disaster."

"How do you know? You've never been married. How can you even *discuss* what you haven't experienced?"

"My dear Madeleine, that's the same thing as saying I can't know Chinamen wear yellowish complexions because I've never been to China. Of course I haven't, but I've met plenty of Chinamen.

"There, that's much better. I also should say I think you're a fine girl and I told Digby so the day he left. What are your plans?"

"I haven't thought, Randall. I haven't even decided to go."

"A week ago I should have thrown up my hands in horror at the idea of your chasing after Digby. A strong-willed man nearing the climacteric, champing for the first time at temptation's bit—no no! But after reading Becker and Graves about this woman, I wouldn't be sure that the risk of not chasing him isn't greater. He, after all, is probably something new and different to her. She, certainly, is something new and different to him. . . ."

"*Why is she new and different?* And must you try to be funny?"

"Be calm now, Madeleine. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. I was only trying to see this problem in the light of reason, and I am well aware that whatever I say is sure to be held against me. I can see from your face that you're plotting and planning. What do you intend to do? Do you intend to go to him and say: *My poor Digby, I am ready to forgive and forget. Let us go back together and seek a perfect adjustment.* Is that what's going on in your beautiful melodramatic head?"

I wish I hadn't asked him here. I never knew Randall was this way. But I mustn't get angry. "You're so wise, Randall. What would *you* recommend?"

"Look, Madeleine dear, I know you think I'm being funny at your expense about something that isn't at all funny. But better laugh than cry, and I am an escapist. Please give me a drink now. . . . Yes, Scotch. . . . Well, here goes. What is Digby's frame of mind about you? First he is resentful, I would guess. Secondly, I would guess that after ten years of marriage he is a bit bored. This is no reflection on you, but simply on human nature—too much same apple pie to put it vulgarly. I said a minute ago that this Fiona whatshername seems new and different to him. Now listen . . .! . . .!

"This may be disastrous advice. Like all great ideas it is full of risk. I'll bet, though, that if you play the part well, you'll have young Digby back at a gallop."

"Do you think . . . Do you think I should go back to him *altogether* at first?" Now Randall's embarrassed.

"No, Madeleine. Decidedly not. In the long term, however, let me see . . ."

"Don't be shy, Randall. Tell me."

"In the long term what you both need more than anything is babies."

"But Randall, we planned and planned. We planned year after year for a spring baby, which is the best time. It never came to anything."

"My God, girl, don't *plan* babies. By all means plan to get your husband back. But once you've got him, cast plans aside. Come March, come December, what the hell does it matter? In this regard, all I can say with some embarrassment, is: Give nature a break."

"Do you think I ought to tell Digby I'm coming?"

"Hmmm. Perhaps better not if you can avoid it. A determined guy like that—he might try to stop you, or do something hasty with the other woman. Now I must go, Madeleine. Call me if I can help over transportation. I wouldn't be so helpful if I was thirty years younger."

Randall is the kindest person in the world. Thinking of us, not him. Oh Digby, if I could only get you back. . . . Tweeds? Tweeds to make a Scots woman sit up. Best's, Bonwit Teller's? Right after lunch.

"Transatlantic operator. Can I help you?"

" I want to make a person-to-person call to Scotland. . . . I'll spell it. . . . I'm afraid I don't know the number. And Operator! Could you say that Mrs. Digby P. Ross wants to make the call at a time when she can speak privately with Colonel Galbraith. This is very important—speak privately with him. Can you do that? Oh, thank you. You'll call me? "

" Is this Mrs. Digby P. Ross? . . . On your call with Colonel Galbraith in Scotland. Four p.m. our time will be suitable, Mrs. Ross. . . . Yes, he said entirely private."

" Farquhar Galbraith here."

" I'm Madeleine Ross, Colonel Galbraith—Digby's wife. He isn't near you, is he? "

" No, no, dear lady. He left a few hours ago to dine with my niece, Fiona. He is being a tower of strength to the gel over some clan festivities she is planning. A tower of strength."

A few hours ago! Don't be put off. Keep to what you were going to say. Keep to the notes. " Oh, Colonel Galbraith, I've been so worried about him since I read the press accounts this morning. How does he seem? "

" I can assure you, Mrs. Ross, that this unhappy affair has been gravely disturbing to me. Your husband is well, perhaps a little subdued and quiet in the house, but wonderfully well. I feel most upset that my task should have been to punish him, deeply upset, but the call of duty is inexorable. Yes, he seems in splendid health physically, and I think I can say that the burden of his remorse is easing. He fished to-day; he flew, I believe, yesterday after the trial; to-morrow I take him to shoot grouse with my niece, a charming girl. Physical interests are the best therapy, I believe. We're all devoted to him you know . . ."

" Three minutes."

" Colonel, I wonder if you could advise me. Is there a hotel anywhere not too far away? I do feel I should be near him. You see he's never done anything like this before, I mean attacking people and so on . . ."

" An hotel, dear lady? There are none within twenty miles. But I wouldn't dream of letting you stay at an hotel. Our Scottish tradition of hospitality would never allow me. It is unthinkable.

And besides, it would be the greatest pleasure in the world to welcome you to this tumbledown old house. Please give me that satisfaction. Please be my guest. We sadly lack the blessing of a woman's personality alas since my dear wife died and m'daughter hardly has the touch. We rough it, of course. Simple fare, an outdoor life. It is little to offer someone so well used to the graces of the American home. But do come, Mrs. Ross. Do, I implore you!"

How kind and sweet and understanding he sounds, not at all anti-American. These columnists! I can't say no. "Thank you, Colonel Galbraith. Why, thank you so much. You're far too kind. I *could* reach Prestwick the day after to-morrow. I wonder. Do you think it would be wiser to say nothing to Digby? To keep it as a surprise for him?"

"A capital idea. I heartily agree. Keep it as a joyful surprise for the dear fellow. Give him no hint, no clue. Ah, how wonderful you American women are, as I was saying to Digby P. a few days ago. So thoughtful and charming."

"Six minutes."

"What would be my best way from Prestwick? Should I hire a car, or come by train, or is there an air service?"

"Were I not so decrepit, my dear Mrs. Ross, I would come down myself to meet you. But I fear *anno Domini* makes that impossible. Let me see now . . . I have it! I have it! There is a perfectly splendid young feller, a neighbour of mine, Lord Balgersho. I can ask him to fly down for you, and the heavy luggage could come on by train. Hamish Balgersho is a delightful chap—one of our greatest war heroes to boot. I'm sure you will get on like a house on fire. Does my tentative suggestion meet with your approval?"

"It sounds perfect, if it isn't putting him to too much trouble."

"Gracious no! He is the most selfless of people. Thinks only of others. What time are you due at Prestwick?"

"Around noon, I think."

"Noon it shall be, the day after to-morrow. This is indeed a happy prospect for me, Mrs. Ross."

"Thank you so much, Colonel Galbraith. *Au revoir*, then."

"Salaam, dear lady. God speed!"

Shop, pack, shop. Buy a copy of the poet Burns. Buy the most

divine tweeds. Buy nylon tricot with fingers crossed. Look at *Vogue's* Scotch number of last spring. Buy this, buy that, buy the next thing. Buy ankle socks, a pair of hideous thick shoes. Buy little presents. Tickets, passport, money, all by Randall.

"There's our flight now. Good-bye, Randall. You've been so sweet."

"God bless you, Madeleine."

It couldn't be this one, could it? Not this one with the swinging kilt and the black head and the hellfire sort of look? He's caught my eye. He's smiling. What a heavenly man. Oh my goodness gracious.

"You're Mrs. Ross, aren't you? My name's Hamish Balgersho."

"I'm Madeleine Ross. How d'you do? How did you guess?"

"I guessed. Can you stand the thought of more flying? No bumps to-day."

"Oh yes. I'm not a bit tired. It's terribly kind of you to meet me."

"Delighted. That's a nice tweed you've got on."

CHAPTER TWELVE

MacLagan and Digby ate their lunch beside the Shepherd's Pool. At this place the river splashed and frolicked. The rounded stones and pebbles gleamed in shallows, and boulders wore damp collars. It was a merry torrent, hurrying into a deep dark pool which swung around below rocks. Salmon often rested there, waiting for the living increment of water that would say to them: *Come further.*

The loud cascade, the silent pool, the ruin of a cottage, the flamboyant oyster-catcher in shrill clip-winged flight, the busy bobbing little dipper—these were contrasting parts of beauty.

MacLagan puffed his pipe. "It's a braw day for all but fishing," he remarked. They were in communion. Even MacLagan's calvinistic zeal was slowed.

"I guess I'll try once more," Digby said because Fiona was in his mind again, the delights of retrospect, the misty islands of anticipation, the things she said and did and danced and sang. She was coming to dinner to-night, which would be a restless time—and could he take her walking up the hill without the Colonel? I'm in a dream, he thought. This passionate dream enfolds my every hour.

MacLagan stood up too. "If Mr. Ross can manage a while alone," he said, "I'll take a walk down by the traps I have in the old dyke. Mind now, not too quick on the recovery, and if there's a fish he'll likely be at the top of the pool where the oxygen is stronger."

He's a scientific old codger, Digby thought as he pulled up his waders. He went across slowly, picking his way over the uneven bottom, anchoring himself step by careful step against the drag of current. But the water was clear, wading easy. Out here the thigh-

deep rush and tumble drowned every other sound. He began to fish. He fished idly to pass the afternoon, to practise this new art at which he was becoming moderately skilful. *Mr. Ross is a natural-born salmon fisher.* Yes, he said that.

I wonder what she'll wear to-night. Will it be the green sweater and the kilt? Or will it be the tartan suit? I wish I could see her not Scotch for once. I wish I could see her in a Cole of California beach-affair. Oh, boy! I wish I could take her into Bergdorf's or some such place, and say: *Get going, Fiona darling bebby. Buy yourself an outfit not in plaid.* I'll let her sport the highland costume every second day. I'll tell her what to wear. *Put this on, Fiona. Take that off, my honeychild. Take it off at once.* Clothes lend enchantment, that's the theme song of *Vogue* and the Bazaar—not to Fiona though, not really.

Poor Madeleine. I'm sorry for her now. How much she missed in life. Perhaps it was my fault too. But such an intellectual snob, oh dear. Is there anything duller than people drooling about Picasso? Is there anything duller than people who interpret poets? I don't believe God meant poetry to be obscure. Poetry was meant to be a song. I long to write poems. I long I long to put Fiona down there for ever in an ode. *Is that a fish?* No, just a snag, free again.

The Colonel once said I was poetic. That awful little man, little chameleon coming home after the trial. *I congratulate you, Digby P. I do wish I'd seen you settle that Bobby's hash. A noble effort. We're all proud of you.*

You have an unusual way of showing your pride, Colonel Galbraith.

Come, come, dear boy. Duty is the very devil. It makes slaves out of the best of us. I tell you what. I still have a few bottles of pre-first-war whisky, superb stuff. Let's break one out.—Drink is my enemy. I am one of those subalterns who cannot drink like a gentleman. I have been ordered to eschew it. The way I glared at him, he blanched.—*Oh, Digby P., surely you'd think less of me if I had shown you favour? But 'nuff said as the saying is. Now for a burra peg. Your health, my gallant friend! Salaam Aleikum. How's that for hooch?*

And so I drank with him as if bygones were bygones. But I'll get my own back some way, you see if I don't. All this is a good example of the position that sin breeds sin in geometrical progression. Me with Fiona; thence to the cop; thence to a deliberate sinking of my pride,

the last being the greatest of these sins, and what next? One, two, four, eight. Do I give one little damn? No, sir.

Just one more cast. You know how I'd like to spend the rest of my natural life? Fishing for salmon and dallying with Fiona turn and turn about, these perfect occupations, the one an appetiser for the other.

Well, that's that. Digby retraced his steps. Was it imagination, or was the current stronger? Had the river risen an inch or two after that heavy shower this morning? As he came from the tugging water and climbed the bank, he saw a dark-clothed figure prop his bicycle and walk this way. It was the Reverend Lachlan McLean.

Heavens, Digby thought. He's come to reproach me for my transgressions.

But it was not so. The minister doffed his hat, shook hands and said: "I saw you fishing so I said to myself I'll just stop and pass the time of day." He was a shy young man, all earnest bones and angles, even a knobbly adam's apple popping up and down behind his clerical collar.

"How nice of you," said Digby. "Let's have a cigarette."

They smoked beside the noisy river. After a while the minister glanced covertly around him and spoke: "Mr. Ross, a man of God [*sic*], has no right to be condoning violence, but it seems to me you taught our constable a lesson he's been needing this long while. I was paying a call on Mrs. McIntoon just half an hour back and she says he came into the kitchen last night and said: *Elsie, I've seen the error of my ways. I'm right sorry about yon American gentleman.* Hee-hee hee," cackled the clergyman.

Digby laughed. One and all, now even McIntoon, seemed to be on his side. "I shouldn't have done it," he said. "But he shouldn't have said I hit him with the baton. That made me mad."

The Minister tutted. "I ken fine how you feel. I feel the same often. It's like the time I spoke too sharply to Willie Reid, one of my Scouts, and his mother had a story all round the Parish I'd shouted curses and blasphemy at him. I gave way to most unchristian wrath, and I'm sorry to say I felt the better for it." He stared at Digby, cleared his throat, blushed and said: "How does Miss Elspeth seem? Does she seem happy in herself?"

Your solitary holy swain. Digby remembered the Colonel's remark on the hill. He never forgot remarks like that. "She seems O.K.," he said carefully. "Of course, I don't know Elspeth well. She's a quiet person; doesn't speak much; perhaps rather subdued by her father."

"She's hudden doon," said the minister with vehemence. "Miss Elspeth's a wonderful lassie the way she slaves for her Dad, the Colonel, and gets no thanks. And you know I'm sure she has worries and the like on her mind because whenever I see her in public as you might say which isn't very often she won't even look at me; but now and then we meet about the Girl Guides and the Scouts, and we have friendly chats: not that she's very talkative even then." He sighed.

Digby knew what was coming here beside the river. It was much the same thing that made divorced or widowed mothers back home pick on him to be the one to explain the facts of life to their stripling sons. *You're such an understanding person, Digby.*

"Oh, look!" he said. A salmon jumped at the far side of the pool, a bright fish. Too far away, though. Couldn't reach him from this bank. An easy cast from the other side, Fiona's side.

"You're a man of the world, Mr. Ross. Would you feel willing to advise me?"

Digby smiled at him. "I'd be glad to try," and thought how incongruous that now of all times in his life a clergyman should seek his counsel.

Mr. McLean drew breath. "It's like this, Mr. Ross. You see I've formed an attachment for Miss Elspeth although no word has passed between us. I dream of her at all times day and night, and it's interfering with my work and although the Kirk does encourage us young ministers to marry, I can't help feeling it is sinful to be possessed about a thing that isn't spiritual however pure, and an earthly passion is selfish at root, is it not, Mr. Ross?"

He did not wait for an answer to this difficult question, but hurried on: "I'm not worthy to clean the stoor, the dust I mean from Miss Elspeth's shoes. I ken that fine. And even if she would have me, her Dad would never spare her, which worries me again because perhaps a daughter's real duty does lie with her widowed

father. Times I think I should move to pastures new, or that I have no true call, and it's been a terrible mistake; but my faith seems to be stronger than ever. Please forgive me for worrying a stranger with my problems, Mr. Ross, but when I saw you fishing alone on this fine day I just said to myself: *There's one person who might be able to help me*, because you see I think you're a good and honourable man without being too good to be able to understand a sinner's difficulties. What shall I do, Mr. Ross?"

Digby thought. How could he give worldly advice to this good and unworldly young man; about Elspeth too, one of the least attractive ladies he had ever known, his cousin—an excellent cook, a superior knitter, but what else? What lay behind her inscrutable façade?

That fish jumped again.

"First of all," he said. "I don't think you should worry about the sinful aspect. Happy marriage would make you an even better minister than you are already. Secondly, there may be occasions when a daughter should sacrifice her own life for her father's sake. I rather doubt it. But Colonel Galbraith is hale, hearty and by no means destitute. Forget about him except as a possible thorn in your flesh. Thirdly, what does the lady feel? Is Elspeth secretly in love with you? I don't know, and I fancy you don't either. The only thing to do is to find out. If the answer is no, then I suggest you lose yourself altogether in missionary zeal. The wounds of love are very very painful, Mr. McLean, but they do heal.

"Now, I know you are a humble man, but my advice is not to be too humble. Elspeth would be just as lucky to have you as you would be to have her, probably more so." Digby repressed a shudder. Quite apart from anything else, think of the Colonel as a father-in-law.

"Where was I? Oh yes. Now do not seem too eager. Just once or twice you might be disdainful, or appear too pre-occupied to notice her. That could work wonders. It may be hard to reconcile with your Christian character, but I can assure you it is important."

"My most sincere thanks, Mr. Ross, I feel so impatient, but I suppose I should hide that too. What a wretched chap I am!" The minister made this last remark with glee. He suddenly looked very happy. "I wish there were more people like you in this world."

" You couldn't be wronger about me." Digby was both flattered and disgusted with himself.

He did not hear the plane until it was close overhead, flying from the south. Balgersho circled; he would do one of his dive-bombing acts any minute now—golly, he was some pilot, some madman, that fellow. His idea of shaking the alcoholic cobwebs out of you had been to locate a golden eagle and hunt the damn' bird in and out of ravines and gullies, along cliff faces with wing-tips scraping rock, hanging on the prop, just making it up and over crests, then into sickening dives the other side. Terrible for the stomach; good for cobwebs. But Hamish did not attack the Shepherd's Pool; he circled decorously once at a few hundred feet and flew on towards Glendrogan.

There was that fish for the third time in the same place, the farthest part of the pool, deep water all the way, no chance to wade. It was a tremendously long cast. " I wonder if I might just reach it," Digby said. " No harm in trying."

" What fly do you have on? " asked the Minister. He was a keen fisherman, like everybody else.

" A Silver Doctor."

" You couldn't do better on a bright afternoon."

Digby stood on the edge of the bank. The rod was a long Grant's Vibration, powerful, the very thing for the job. He false-casted his way across the pool, dropped the point. The fly ringed fifteen feet short. He did not let it sink but drew out still more line, locked that, heaved up and back with all his strength, check—the line looped out behind him. He waited too long, was just too slow in the forward recovery—caught up. " Hell's bells and damnation! " he said. " Sorry, Minister."

" It's very vexing," said Mr. McLean, going to free the fly. " I doubt there's only one trick might get you there. Pay out more line yet, and I'll draw the fly back against you. Cast like the very devil himself when I say the word."

Digby cast like the very devil. The first time the fly whacked loud as a pistol shot into his felt hat. He took this calmly. With all my faults, he thought, I do have steady nerves.

" Ca' canny now," said the Minister. " I mind once I hooked

myself in the cheek. It was a case of cutting it out and two stitches and the scar's there yet."

" Caution ne'er stormed a fortress in life's battle," cried Digby. Among vague memories of that night, the codification of his philosophy remained clear. " And don't you forget it, young man, *à propos* of our recent conversation. Ready? "

" Go! " said the Minister. He was giggling away to himself.

Digby used the last driving ounce of his strength. The barbed Silver Doctor hissed past his ear, following the long loop of line and leader, rolling over straight and true right on the knob on the button at the very spot close in below the pale-brown lather of foam where the pool turned against rock.

This salmon did not take mildly underwater. It attacked the fly like a hungry trout. " Glory be! " shouted Mr. McLean. " Oh, Glory on us! " He danced about.

" Tell me what to do." MacLagan! Where was MacLagan?

The Minister sobered up and told him what to do.

Twenty minutes later the fish was tired. It rolled with a lemon-silver of belly, righted itself, made short lunges, rolled more slowly, hung there in clear deep water, played out, ready for the gaff. But where was the gaff?

" He must have left it here."

" It's no good," cried McLean. " I've searched all over. There's no two ways about it. I'll have to go in." He whipped off black jacket, trousers, shoes and socks. Even at this tense moment Digby noticed the incongruity of the gangling priest, clad only in short pants, undervest, dicky and collar. " Bring him round to the sand, Mr. Ross. Slowly now." The Minister waded to his thighs on the sandy patch just this side of fast water.

Digby brought round the fish. McLean waited, stalked, plunged, missed. The reel screamed out. Try again. Slowly, oh so slowly. *Just like a Great White Heron*, Digby thought. He panted and laughed.

This time the Minister made no mistake. He was wet from head to foot, but he had the arching salmon clasped to his chest. He clambered out, dispatched it efficiently with a stone, removed the hook and laughed in a very hearty fashion, not at all lovelorn. " What would my flock say if they saw me now? "

"They would be as full of admiration as I am," said Digby. He sat down to recover his breath. "My first salmon, and was it wonderful!" He looked at the bright fish, still quivering on the grass.

"Fresh-run," the Minister said. "Fifteen pounds is my guess. A man's first salmon is a great thing in his life."

Like a man's first love, Digby thought, and did not say it. Like Maria Dexter at Huntington, Long Island. Like Dogsbody Elspeth for this fellow. Like Fiona after the dull years. Like a man's first or last or finest salmon.

"Mr. McLean," he said. "That was a noble effort. From now on I'm your man. Anything you want done, say the word."

"Please call me Lachlan, Mr. Ross. Or any name you fancy except Padré. But not Padré if you please, because that reminds me of the Colonel. It's very unchristian of me, Mr. Ross, but between ourselves I am not fond of Colonel Galbraith. He is hard on Miss Elspeth, and he is inclined to be sarcastic with me and about the aims of the Church."

"My limited experience tells me that Galbraith responds only to rough treatment," Digby said. "Which is what I was going to suggest to you. Any trouble with him—pocket your principles and give him hell—plain and unvarnished. It's the only hope."

Lachlan shook his head doubtfully, then patted his skimpy chest. "My underclothes are nearly dry. I'd like fine to be a lotus-eater and bask in this beneficent sun, but I'd better get respectable before anybody sees me." He began to dress. "You know, Mr. Ross, you are grateful to me for capturing your fish, but the truth is I enjoyed it. For all my battles with myself, the atavistic urges lie very near the top. I'm not worthy to be a Minister of the Gospel. Whiles I think I'm just a primitive beast lusting to kill."

Digby reclined in the sun. "I should say that you're a very Christian man," he remarked lazily. "But if you really want to win Elspeth's hand—and I must say I think she'd be an extremely lucky girl to have you—then you must allow a little of the Adam to peep out. Don't forget what I'm saying."

"Indeed I won't," said the young Minister. "Oh dear, I'm in such a muddle about myself. But you've done me a power of good. Cheerio then, Mr. Ross, and thank you."

He mounted the bicycle and rode off, wrestling with the devil in himself no doubt. Digby closed his eyes.

" Well now, a nice wee fish too, and here's me taking the gaff away on ma back. You'd think I might learn sense after all these years. How did you get it landed, Mr. Ross? I'm right sorry." MacLagan was unbending. Perhaps everybody's first salmon was his first salmon in some degree.

" The Minister happened to be here. He undressed and went in after it. Pretty sporting of him."

MacLagan nodded gravely. " Reverend McLean has the makings o' a Meenister."

They walked home, discussing America, about which MacLagan had a surprising knowledge. Of all these people, only MacLagan asked intelligent questions about the U.S.A. and listened carefully to Digby's answers. The Colonel knew far more, but his astute questions were largely rhetorical, or he would be reminded of an Indian story, or his butterfly brain would go off at some other tangent. Balgersho wanted to know about automobiles and planes—of which Digby knew little—otherwise he was not interested. And as for Fiona—well, darling Fiona!

" Fourteen and a half," said MacLagan at the scales. " I'll clean the fish and bring it up to the Big Hoose."

" Oh, and here's a small present, MacLagan. Thank you for a most enjoyable day."

" It's always a pleasure to be with Mr. Ross. And a relief too, if you'll excuse me mentioning the subject, to hear from Danny Cleghorn—no friend of mine I'm telling ye—that it was all a fabrication about Mr. Ross drinking. He said you hadn't touched a drap. I intend to have a word with yon McIntoon the first time our roads cross. Good night, then, Mr. Ross."

" I *had* been drinking," Digby said.

" I'll not believe it."

Digby walked on. He had an uncomfortable and yet most pleasurable feeling that he was becoming or had become a hero in these parts. I wonder what the Reverend Lachlan McLean would make of that? he thought. I tread the path of sin, and right away I

become a most popular guy, not just respected like I used to be. I won Fiona. I won my salmon. What next?

Fiona's car was not outside the house. He went in. Balgersho and Elspeth were talking in the hall. They stopped.

"Hallo, old boy," Hamish said. "How are you? I brought you a sweet surprise."

"Indeed," said Digby. "Some little doll, was it, perhaps?" He had this character buttoned up now.

Balgersho looked solemn, raised his eyebrows, "I'll be back for dinner." He went out.

"I got a fish—fourteen and a half pounds."

Lately Elspeth had been giving him ugly looks. She would hardly even say good morning. But now she smiled quite warmly. "Did you, Digby? Well done!"

"Thanks to Lachlan McLean. We didn't have a gaff, so he dived in for it. I admire that fellow tremendously."

"Hmmm," Elspeth remarked. "Must get a hot-water bottle." She departed.

Digby could hear the Colonel's voice droning from the smoking-room direction. Talk, talk, what a gasbag! Must go and tell him about the salmon. The french windows were open; the voice came from outside. Digby stopped half-way.

"I can't express what a relief, dear lady," he was saying. "What a great pleasure it is to have you with us, a load off my mind, not that he isn't wonderfully well all things considered. It reminds me of one time my dear wife was spending the summer up at Simla, donkey's years ago, and she heard somehow or other by the grapevine, the servants were frightful gossips you know, Mohammed Khan would say to Ibrahim: *My sahib is out of sorts*, and before you could say Jack Robinson every bearer in India would know about it. Well, Mona heard by tom-tom that I had the cafard, hotweatheritis, call it what you will, down in the plains, and without a word of warning or a moment's hesitation she came down to me on the tenth of June. It was like a furnace that day, I remember, a hundred and twenty-two on my veranda. When I think of what we men owe to you women, I am indeed humble. What lucky fellows we are! Anyway, I packed him off fishing this morning, the best medicine of all . . ."

Digby did not toy with his suspicion. He went out. Madeleine and Colonel Galbraith sat side by side in deck-chairs on the croquet lawn. She turned. "Hallo, Digby," she said. She wore a coat and skirt of very bright tweed, a pair of shoes like Fiona's, only brown. She was bare-headed, a totally different hair-do of the windswept kind. "I just couldn't resist coming to this divine country."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"HALLO," said Digby. Surprise and outrage struggled in him. He very nearly turned on his heel and walked back to the house. But he mastered himself. *She's your wife*, his code said; common sense told him to beware the Colonel. He made a very smart decision. He bent and kissed Madeleine on the forehead.

"Isn't this the most delightful wow you ever heard of?" The Colonel was bouncing with bonhomie and good cheer, his eyes shrewd little marbles. "Go and get yourself a drink," he said kindly. "And you might top me up too, young feller. Half and half. Oh, by the way, Digby P., there's a piece all about us in some paper your wife brought. It's on the table."

Why did she come? To fetch me back? What else could it be? And that old bastard must have been in it! He must have expected her. I'll send her home on the next plane. I'll teach her!

The New York *Express* was open at Cy Becker. The first reading was a shock, but after the second, things suddenly seemed far too bad to matter. Indeed, they were funny. *Presiding blimp magistrate Galbraith* was good, and *drink-sodden Ambassador* was all right too. From anger, Digby passed to hearty laughter. Madeleine's arrival was explained. Practically any minute now she would put on a finely dramatised wife-to-the-rescue act. He poured himself a moderate drink and the Colonel a snorter. He carried glasses and paper outside. "Becker certainly went to town on you, Colonel."

"You betcha! I haven't been in the papers, except the *Citizen*, for ages, and never in America, I'll wager. Absurd, of course, because as I was saying to your dear wife, I dote on Americans by and large, particularly the ladies, God bless them. Did you see your own likeness? It's farther on."

Digby found the picture. " Good of Fiona," he said blandly. " I wouldn't exactly say it does *me* justice. He watched Madeleine's eyes. The lashes might have flickered or they might not. He did not care what she said or looked or thought. He had known that already, and yet he was amazed about it, and he did not want to be more unkind to her than was necessary. Poor Madeleine, quite shattered by events.

" We had the loveliest flight up from Prestwick," she said. " Lord Balgersho took me over Loch Tay and Kenmore. Do you remember the poem Burns wrote on the chimney-piece of the inn, Colonel Galbraith? One of his best, I always think:

> " ' *Th' outstretching lake, imbosomed 'mong the hills,*
> *The eye with wonder and amazement fills*
> *The Tay meandering sweet in infant pride*
> *The Palace rising on his verdant side . . .*'

and so on and so on. I adore it."

What's this? I liked Burns, what I could understand of his language. She said he was a . . . Oh, ho! " Not too bad," Digby said. " Not too bad a rhyme at all for a lustful ploughman."

The Colonel sprang to his feet, deeper crimson. " Now look here, Digby P," he snarled. " That's a bit over the odds. I won't have Burns called a lustful ploughman." He was trembling with anger. " Do you hold nothing sacred? "

" Not a thing," said Digby. " I'm only a yankee bum, and male at that. Calm yourself, Colonel! "

Galbraith muttered and sat down. The tension eased off. It was another glorious evening. Madeleine sighed. " Heavenly! " she said. " Lord Balgersho promised to take me fishing to-morrow. I'm simply dying to have a rod in my hands. Is that his river? "

" No," explained the Colonel. " That's the Kil. Fiona has the right bank. I have the left. Balgersho's river Bal is a tributary of the Kil, or vice versa according to which way you look at it. They join over there beyond a place we call the Bloody Gorge."

" The Bloody Gorge," she said musingly. " What a fierce name."

" It was the scene of a massacre." *My* massacre in a small way when you come down to it, he thought, watching across the valley,

no signs of Fiona's car. "Talking of rivers, Colonel, I killed a salmon this afternoon, fourteen and a half, in the Shepherd's Pool."

"Hot dog!" cried the Colonel with tremendous enthusiasm. "Bravo, young feller. You've shot grouse, you've killed a fish—didn't put a hook into anyone, did you? Nothing remains now but a stag. *Watch out!* they'll all be roaring in the forest. *Here comes Digby P. in his rubber boots.* Well, we must celebrate this fresh triumph. Mrs. Ross—Madeleine, if you'll allow an old fellow to call you by your charming name—Madeleine, let me get you a sweetener, not that such a thing is possible." He was indescribably arch.

He took his own glass too. The Colonel started with pink gins at eleven a.m., rested briefly after luncheon, and soaked whisky until midnight. You could not say that alcohol affected him. He was equally ebullient and intolerable at breakfast as at dinner. You had to admit he was a well-trained subaltern.

"How nice of you to come," Digby said to her alone. He was annoyed again, not because he cared whether Madeleine was in Iceland or at Pensacola, but because it was a breach of good taste to arrive like this. Also, things were going to be damned awkward; he could see that standing out a mile. And what was this new game by a complete stranger, a wife he knew all about and nothing about? The tweeds, the brogues, the cascading hair, the love of Burns, the thirst for sport—what were these in aid of? He was suspicious. If she had come here sadly and pathetically to get him back, then he would be kind in his unkindness. If she had come here to make a fool of him, she could look out for herself.

"I don't know why I came," Madeleine said. "I can't even remember. All I know is that the Highlands are sort of fey. It's like a dream country here."

The Colonel was back. "There you are, my dear. I do hope you're going to be happy. We rough it a bit, but I'm glad to say that things are looking up. I managed to charter a cook, Mrs. Moloney from Dublin town. She took up residence this very day bearing the highest of references. It'll be a nice change from Elspeth's stodge, even if in my sad experience I have found that life with cook nowadays is apt to be a brief honeymoon, the better the briefer. However, it will free Elspeth for some much needed housework."

" She'll have to be a red-hot cook to improve on Elspeth."

" Pish! " the Colonel weaselled, " you've hardly sampled Elspeth's culinary efforts."

Which is true not only about Elspeth but about many things in this dream country as she said a minute ago, hitting on a description that somehow expressed it. Behind the hills and the moody river, the grouse, the salmon and the stag, behind before and permeating all these and all the people and my uninteresting wife coming by surprise and Mrs. Moloney the Dublin cook is my dream goddess and she's coming to dinner.

" I think I'll take a bath now," Digby said, as he had said so many times to Madeleine.

" This is a gala night," called the Colonel after him. " Full fig, Digby P. Dinner jackets! Do give us a break by donning your tuxedo."

Digby hurried to his north wing. He had something to find out before taking a bath. He peered round every door. Each room had the same central huddle of furniture under dust sheets blue or red, each had striped wallpaper of dreadful polychrome, each had staggy or fishy or birdy or doggy pictures; all were unoccupied. What a relief—any proximity would have been painful, nay indecent; and it did show Madeleine intended to be sensible. Well, live and let live. On with the mad dance. He splashed. He sang a song she had adapted to him at the joyful gates while moon smiled, and owl was wise and cool and sad in the empty world without. " Oh Charlie is my darling, my darling, my darling. Oh Charlie is my darling, my young-ng Chevalier."

Fiona was there when he went downstairs. She was drinking bourbon moodily in an armchair. But wonder of wonders and joy of joys, she wore no trace of Highland costume. To-night she wore a short evening gown of flaming saffron, held aloft by some miracle of counterpoise or thrust below her bare brown shoulders. It was a dress in a million, a brain-child out of Captain Molyneux, Jacques Fath, Christian Dior and Madame Schiaparelli, all the great ones, an inspired quintessence.

" Let's have a look at you." He took her by the hands.

She did not smile, but suffered herself to stand. He drank of her

beauty—the gleaming auburn mane, brushed and brushed and brushed by Nanny, the satin tan of skin, the green and sulky eyes, the splendid semi-captive bounty, the dress a sheath then flowing down away and out so gaily from the hips, the gossamer nylons which were his contribution, the tangy whisper of Tabu—his also, bought by late whim at Idlewild.

The house was quiet. He gathered her into his embrace. She was angry about something but probably not him. She did not say: *Don't muss me up!* She gave back good measure. They broke. She repaired her face. He wiped his mouth. He said: "You're marvellous. You're a knock-out. You're not of this world."

"What's this about your wife?" she hissed. "What gudgey capers is she up to?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. It doesn't make any difference."

But footsteps on the gravel. Digby moved away, not too far, just casually in the manner of an accomplished villain.

It was Balgersho. "Hallo," he said. "I say, Queenie, you'll be blowing your tops'ls if you don't look out. No tantrums now. That's exactly what would do it. Hallo again, Digby."

"I hate you and yer blether," Fiona snarled. It did for a moment seem that she must blow her topsails. But no. Her breathing eased.

Balgersho made a noble figure—brown velvet doublet, bright dress kilt of many colours, golden-tasselled badger sporran, polished waist-belt, diced hose red and white, skean-dhu tucked into hose below a stalwart knee, silver-buckled shoes, ceremonial dirk at hip, the careless elegance of lace at throat and wrist. Crowning it all, his own leashed amiable arrogance. Once more that queer poetic muse struck Digby, this time an adaptation of a favourite poem, but a reminder of a book that he detested: *Highland Chieftain on the spree, cock of the walk to eternity.* It certainly summed up Hamish Balgersho.

I must be careful, Digby thought. I must take a grip and observe the proprieties and try to keep my eyes off Fiona. I really must out of fairness to Madeleine, poor Madeleine.

But here she was. She might for the daytime have adopted a guise of the prickly tweeds, the lumbering footwear she despised. Not for this gala night. By coincidence, or by some woman's envious imitative intuition, Madeleine also wore a short and strapless evening

gown. Hers was the deepest shade of wine. It, too, stayed in suspension by the miracles of artifice and nature. Her shoulders were ivory perfection, her black hair groomed to a glowing gloss.

But what a difference! The warm opulence, the undulant brown skin, the fiery passion of the hill—his new love. The cool constraint, the white skin, the smart sophistication of the city—his old discarded love, no more appealing than a graceful statue.

And yet, absurdly, the rooster male, Digby felt pleasure, felt a bolstering of his ego that he in plain black evening clothes—not Hamish bedizened with fanciful regalia—that he should be the master of these beauties, both at the full splendour of their womanhood, both his for the taking. Yet he wanted only one.

"Madeleine," he heard his own voice say. "I don't think you've met Fiona Kilburnie of the Birks."

Madeleine smiled. She left you cold, but she did wear graces. "How d'you do," she said, and shook Fiona's hand. "I've been looking forward to meeting you."

"Welcome," said Fiona, also friendly. "Welcome to our Highlands, Mistress Ross." In a lesser person that might have been far-fetched, grandiloquent. With Fiona it was right; it was the expression of her heritage. In a strange way, too, it stated her higher eminence on Cupid's ladder.

They parted, and Madeleine accepted sherry, and Hamish prowled over. "My God," he said, looking down at her. "That dress suits you," so abrupt and different from his nonchalant habit, like the rough-hissed summons of a courting python.

Madeleine blushed. "Thank you," she said, regained composure. "I do love lace, and are those really knives, those wicked-looking things?" She touched his dirk, and pointed down to skean-dhu. He drew them one by one to show her.

"Oh, a fork too. How darling!"

"More whisky, Digby."

He was nervous of Fiona. He was the master in his dreams, telling her what and what-not she should do. But somehow in real life—so far as it was real—even when travelling to and past a cordial surrender, she was the one who called the tune.

He went for whisky. What a superlative solution, he was thinking.

What a marvellous outcome to my problems if Madeleine and Hamish were to hit it off. I must be the most immoral guy there ever was, because I like that idea as a practical *modus vivendi altascotiaterribus*, but another part of me would have them both at beck and call. It's very odd I had to wait till forty-one to know the billy-goat that lurks in Digby Ross. It isn't only what you want. It's what you want to be able not to want.

Now here was Elspeth, dumpy as ever in a floor-length gown of mauve chiffon, all rolls and bulges. Poor Elspeth. Poor utilitarian Martha. But you know, another very very screwy thing I'm just thinking is that beauty is subjective. I believe this has always been a matter or a theory of philosophical dispute; but here is the living proof. There can't be any question. If that boy Lachlan saw them now, his eyes would choose plain Elspeth as loveliest of the three.

" Hallo everybody," said Colonel Galbraith. He was dressed up too, but not with lace. The gong sounded. " Let's make a good impression on Mother Moloney's first night."

Fiona and Madeleine led the way through wide doors precisely level, then Elspeth, Digby, Hamish, Colonel. " Sit in the place of honour, Madeleine my dear," so kind and courtly. " Fiona, you on my left. Digby at Elspeth's fair right hand. Hamish, take the remaining pew."

They sat down to bowls of soup. But straightaway the Colonel grew darkly puce. " Look here, Elspeth," he gobbled. " Haven't I said *ad nauseam* that I will not tolerate heather as a table decoration? Of all the vulgarities, my God, I ask you. We're not English plutos hiring grouse moors for the season. What's the meaning of it? "

The table was rather prettily festooned with heather. Heather in a silver bowl, heather on mahogany, heather twined around the candlesticks, heather sprigs in napkins, purple heather everywhere. Digby couldn't see that it was vulgar. In fact tastefully subdued. Yet another idiosyncrasy of this short dictator.

" Not me," said Elspeth. " Special treat by cook. Says they did it at her last place."

" Oh dear, oh dear," the Colonel grumbled; but the wind had left his sails. " Oh, well."

" What delicious soup," said Madeleine. " I don't think I know it."

" Hare soup, made from the blood of the blue hare."

Digby glanced across. The very mention of gore would make her shudder. " Really? " she said, and drank the rest.

" I guess food must be a terrible problem with your tiny rations, Colonel Galbraith. I do think you people in this old island have shown such wonderful grit and patience."

" Call me Farquhar, m'dear, I wish you would. Or some of my friends give me Farquie, not that I have any friends as I told Digby P. But do! I feel I know you well already."

" You're the sweetest person." Could this be Madeleine?

Elspeth took away the plates. Fiona fiddled with her table-knife. Balgersho smiled at ease.

" As for rationing, it does trouble them a lot in the outside world, I believe, not that I ever go. But here in this neck of the woods we get along famously. The buxom ox, the odd sheep, the peach-fed porker, the side of bacon, who's to tell? No, if I say it myself, we run some splendid rackets. And should one of these Government Inspectors come snooping around, well my dear girl, you can imagine what we do to him. We have our ways and means as Digby P. said to the police constable."

" Why do you call him Digby P.? I never thought of it." As if he was some kind of incongruous specimen on a slab."

" Because the P.'s a deep dark secret."

" Mind yer manners, Uncle Farquhar! "

Digby soothed Fiona's knee under the table as he watched Madeleine's lips open to dispel that secret, which was a matter of clan pride now to the Chief of Clan Kilburnie, mistress also of the Prissitulchan sept, extinct except for him. But the door opened. In swept the cook.

Mrs. Moloney was a big woman, a very striking grey-haired lady of about fifty. In her starched white housecoat she reminded you of a battleship steaming majestically into a tropical harbour at day's end —the purples, wines, saffrons, beauties, silver and mahogany reflections which were the dining-room on this gala evening. She was impressive. She bore a silver platter, on that a mighty sizzling roast of beef. She placed it before the Colonel.

His eyes gleamed. " Oh by Jove I say Mrs. Moloney this is

capital. Did you ever see such a sirloin?" He stood, rasped carver expertly twice along steel, then sliced as smooth as butter down across the undercut. "Just right. I hope you're hungry, Madeleine."

"Sure and they're hungry the pretty ladies and the pretty gentlemen in kilts. Says I to meself, Bridget Moloney, says I, it's a pure delight to be cooking again for a military man like Colonel Galbraith. He's a gentleman will be loving the blessing of good food."

The Colonel bridled.

Mrs. Moloney's deep Irish voice was lovelier than the Scots. She took round the plates. She had an indulgent word for everyone. She stood at her new master's side until he too had sampled a mouthful of tender beef, dark gravy, Yorkshire pudding, green peas, roast potatoes, horseradish sauce. She watched him solicitously.

"Mistress Moloney, it's perfection. I haven't eaten food like this for years."

She beamed. You could see how she doted already on the Colonel's stomach. It was precious to her; nobody else's stomach really mattered. "And did you like my heather treat?"

"Charming," he said, not batting an eyelid. "I congratulate you."

She took them all within her compass of benevolence. "The Lords and Ladies," she said. "The quality. It's like real old times in Ireland. Thank you, Colonel dear." She bowed and went out.

Everybody's heart warmed to Mother Moloney for her cooking and for calling them the quality—not least Digby. Only Elspeth seemed to sulk as she took round claret, an excellent full-bodied wine. The Colonel himself carried a glass of it to the kitchen. He came back. He was benign. It was decidedly his evening. "Happy days are here again, touch wood and cross my fingers. Now we'll have a toast for a special occasion because I don't believe I ever in all my life sat between two such visions of beauty—our Highland Queen and our New World Queen, the fair one and the dark one, the warm dumb one and the clever cool one."

But the Colonel's tongue had got the better of him again. As he attributed these qualities each to its owner by gestures of his pudgy hand, both the lovely faces showed displeasure.

Fiona bared her teeth: "You're a haver. I often was top in gym and singing."

Madeleine frowned a very little. "Good Heavens, Farquie," she murmured. "Don't call *me* an intellectual type. I'm completely physical and dumb. I'm sure Fiona's far far cleverer than me."

"Sorry," said the Colonel. "Eloquence is my enemy. All I meant was that you're both wonderful; I'm quite sure Digby and Hamish will agree. Mud in your eyes, you fascinating creatures."

The men and poor Elspeth stood to drink.

After beef it was meringues, cream from the home farm, raspberries from the garden. What a simple succulent feast fit for the quality of Scotland and America.

Hamish had not spoken much. He now captured Madeleine from her host. "What time shall we start to-morrow? I'll fly over for you." He stared at her.

"Any time, Hamish. I'm such an early bird. I'll be ready whenever you say. Oh, I'm looking forward to the fishing and everything so much. Could we go up the mountains too?"

"Easily. Come to think of it, if the river's in ploy, which I think it will be, and we get a fish, I don't see why we mightn't try for a stag in the afternoon."

"It's too early for a stag," put in Fiona with sharp disapproval.

"There's no close season. They're not in velvet. They're mine not yours, M.Y.O.B., Queenie. You look after your Royal pets, and leave my stags to me."

It was unkind the way Balgersho said it. He might even be very slightly angry. You couldn't tell. But it was certainly annoying the way this guy she cordially disliked could get the better of her every time—and you, whom she loved so madly, never could.

He soothed her knee again, back and forward through sheer warmed nylon.

"Digby P. hasn't tried for a stag yet," said the Colonel, peacemaker. "It would hardly do for Madeleine to beat him to it. That would upset the most devoted husband. I say, Fiona, why don't you pocket your principles and take old Digby out to-morrow and make a competition of it? See if the Birks can beat Balgersho! Mixed doubles, America and Scotland. Oh, do! It's a magnificent conception."

The Colonel's eyes were gleaming. Where was the catch, what

was the devilry in this idea? Always a good reason and the true reason. Never able to take anything at face value. But he was encouraging what you yourself had thought would be a marvellous outcome to your problem.

Digby's right hand gave suave approval. Pat pat, and squeeze. *Say yes, Fiona.*

This time she did obey him. Or perhaps she would always throw down the gauntlet to Balgersho. Whatever the reason, she said calmly: "My plans for the Gathering are all made. Och yes, we'll take you on and beat you. The best head wins the competition." She returned encouragement to her partner. *Squeeze*, the four slim separated fingers and the thumb.

"Okay," said Balgersho. "But no tame staggies in the park, remember."

"Please could I have the livers?" The Colonel was quite humble. "Betcha Bridget Moloney can fry stag's liver like nobody's business. Please can that be my perk?"

The Chieftains nodded. Sometimes they were quite haughty to him.

"You mentioned a gathering," said Madeleine, leaning across. "A Gathering of the Clans? Why, how exciting!"

"Just the one clan," Fiona said with a proud pout. "The Gathering of Clan Kilburnie! The day after to-morrow my clansmen will come from the four corners of the earth to pay me homage. And it's all arranged—down to the last wee item: the buffet lunch, the Birks Royal Whisky, the massed pipers and the dancing, the lawns all cut, the throne on Chieftain's Rock. I did everything and Digby helped me. Digby's been like a henchman. He's to make a speech and march at my side in the procession. It's a special honour to America."

There was a chorus of surprise at this, hitherto a closely guarded secret. Fiona revealed it now with much the air of a Cabinet Minister who lets the cat prematurely out of the bag about the radar or the atom bomb or the spaceship—a trifle guilty afterwards, but proudly defiant.

Digby had agreed unwillingly to march and speak—these were small quids in the great game of *quid pro quo*. The idea made him

proud, but also nervous—not so much the marching as the speech. He did not know what to say. He did not even have a subject. None of the old material would do. It was thirty-six hours away. It had been bothering him off and on for days. Oh, dear.

"Digby is always making speeches," Madeleine said in the nicest possible nasty way. "Such clever ones about dams and things. Miles over my head."

"You're a man of parts, Digby P.," said the Colonel, beady-eyed. "I might be there to cry Bravo!"

"You'd better watch out, old boy, or Queenie will have you playing the pipes."

"He'd play'm better'n you," Fiona hurled across the bowl of heather.

Balgersho smiled. He seemed thoughtful to-night. He was not usually a thoughtful-seeming man. He took a sip of water.

"I tell you what," said the Colonel, reaching on the tack of another idea. "Why don't we have a foursome? I'll play and you four dance. Hamish, you can take Madeleine through it. Fiona, you teach Digby P. as part of his clan education. Now let's go and have our coffee. Elspeth, find my pipes."

"What a darling idea!" cried Madeleine. "I long to do your Highland dances."

So, in a while they danced a foursome reel upon the lawn. Colonel Galbraith was a good piper of the apoplectic never-quite-bursting type. His jowls and throat swelled enormously; he spanked the bag, went for brief walks, stopped to lick his reed, fiddled with clanking drones then blew and spanked again until all three drones squealed harmoniously to his satisfaction. He plucked a few sobbing grace-notes with the small finger of his right hand. He was ready.

"Figure of eight first, Madeleine. I'll show you."

"Just watch what I do, Digby."

They nodded to the Colonel, and the music began, and they were into the lovely rhythm of the Strathspey. Digby lumbered through it, pulled here and thrust there by Fiona. She was a heavenly dancer. Balgersho was magnificent. Madeleine made a woman's light-footed compromise with the strange steps, contriving to be graceful. Only Digby was alien, clumsy and resentful in his dinner jacket, being

made a guy of. Now into the hurrying scurry of the reel-time, Balgersho's arms high, kilt flying, legs twinkling in a flurry of double ball-cuts, his yells the savage calling of his blood. It was pagan and impressive. Fiona cried too, and so did Madeleine. Digby blundered through in silence. All over. He mopped his brow. He had enjoyed it in a sort of a way.

"How glorious," cried Madeleine, face flushed. "I could dance and dance all night." She kicked off her shoes again, threw her arms wide, pirouetted, and bounded all the way along the croquet lawn with skips and jumps and scampers like a ballerina, and back again to twirl once slowly, hands linked above her head. She sank in a deep curtsey to the Colonel, then held her right hand out to him, fingers drooping.

"Bravo!" he said, bending to kiss it in courtly fashion. "By Jove, the most graceful thing I ever saw." Good God! Digby thought. She's gone crazy.

"That's not real dancing," Fiona muttered. "That's only bally."

The sun was setting. The air seemed to hold an echo of the pipes, but it was quiet. You could not imagine any other place than this. Madeleine walked with Hamish to his plane. The Colonel went in for a burra peg. Elspeth was still washing up. "Let's stroll," Digby said.

They strolled on the mossy path which led to the Colonel's giant lily. They could not be seen from the house. They kissed.

"She isn't as nice as I am, is she? She hasn't got near as braw a figure, has she Digby?"

"No," he growled.

But a cough. They parted.

Dougald, the gardener-chauffeur, the sly factotum, was approaching. He was a thin man with a mournful joke in his face; he had the quality of unexpectedness; he was a piper, bachelor and ornithologist; he was the lugubrious wag of the glen. He came closer, tilting his head back to watch the sky; then he started, and raised his cap. "It's a rare nicht for a dander, Miss Fiona and Mr. Ross. Here's me near running into ye. Did you see the woodcock that was roding? I never saw that as late afore."

"No, I didn't," said Fiona.

"What's roding?" Digby asked. He was sure this guy had seen them.

"It's a flight the cock bird makes at sunset. He flies round and round on the same course, to show off like to the female, I understand from the books. Now who would expect him to be doing the like of that? You'd think he'd be tired of it by now. I hear tell you have the woodcock in America, Mr. Ross. Would they be roding in the month of August?" All this with courtesy and an expressionless face.

"I wouldn't know," said Digby. He had an idea that the foxy fellow was making a double entendre about Digby Ross and the male woodcock. "I'll let you know when I get back, Dougald."

"That would be a kindness." The man passed on with tactful haste.

"Damn! He's sure to talk."

"I don't mind. I'm not caring if you're not, Digby. It's just us being natural isn't it? Like the woodcock and the beasties and the flowers and everything. Kiss me again, Digby."

But soon they wandered back. He pushed her to the top of the hill. She chugged away. Madeleine had retired. The Colonel was still lapping whisky. Elspeth had started on another sweater, a red one. The Press called from London, but Digby refused to speak.

He was the sole inhabitant of the north wing. He had eaten too much and danced too vigorously too soon after. He thought again about his speech. They came easily to him in ordinary life. This one would not come, not a clue or a vestige. His mind was a riot of images and of the devastating things she said; *Like the woodcock and the beasties and the flowers and everything.* How did the flowers come into it? But it was not a speech-contriving mind. Then he started wondering what the hell could have gotten into Madeleine. He slept.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THEY CLIMBED all day. It seemed to Digby that he had toiled uphill forever, that there was nothing but ascent, that there would always be a higher crest beyond.

They had moved in a quarter circle. The south wind touched first upon their right cheeks; then, as they swung along the massif of Ben McKercher, it blew in general from full ahead. It was a strong wind, a true wind in the mares'-tailed sky, but here at the steep roof of Scotland, it swirled and turned upon itself and dived and funnelled by corrie, cliff and gully. It was a living thing of contradiction and caprice, of counter tunes within the north-driving melody.

They had paused often to search new ground. They had seen many beasts; none that satisfied Fiona. *No*, she would mutter, steadying the telescope against her stick, leaning back in that leg-flung poise which might have been abandoned at other times in other moods, but not to-day on the job in competition with Balgersho. *No*, and again: *No*, dismissing each stag. *A good ten-pointer but he wouldn't win.*

Meanwhile Digby would recover breath. He was a humble apprentice admiring the virtuosity of his mentor. She wore a jacket with the kilt; her hair was gathered in a dark green kerchief; her face shone brown and beautiful, and dried in the wind, and grew wet again at moments. She hardly spoke. *Come away then*, was about all she said, closing the telescope with hollow snap, leading the way to still higher places. He trailed along behind, carrying the rifle. He was tired and hot and a bit fed-up. It isn't for me she wants the stag, he thought sourly. Oh no! It's to win a skirmish in the eternal feud.

But now at last the true summit was in view, and she took him into her confidence. " That's the top of McKercher," she murmured, pointing to a cairn of stones a little above them to the left. They were following the right side of a shoulder. " The march with Balgersho goes by the highest ground up over and down south. This is our last chance."

She drew open the telescope. This time she wriggled forward on her front to spy between rocks. Her legs were very bare above the knee. He watched them. They were the wrong thing to watch at such a time, but he had nothing else to do. There was a network of fine little scratches criss-crossed about the dulcet skin, not real scratches—just the wiry teasings of the heather. It was her legs that told him she had seen a worthy stag. They drummed up and down, one two three four times like a swimmer's crawl, expressive, " Here, Digby," she breathed. " Leave the rifle."

He crawled up with his binoculars, edged to a cleft as stealthily as one of those cut-throat Pathans the Colonel went on about. He saw the stag at once. It lay in a small flat place on the ridge that fell south from the crest of McKercher. It lay broadside, but the head faced north—downwind—turning very slowly from side to side. Six points—or was it seven? on one antler, six on the other, a wide-sweeping head. The stag rested wary but unsuspicious at the very march, the boundary watershed between the hills of Kilburnie and the hills of Balgersho. Four thousand and ninety-six, he remembered, was the height of McKercher; the corrie would be a couple of hundred feet below that. Range? Deceptive, no idea in this thin air across the void. Even so high, where snow still lay in isolated rain-dark patches, the wind was almost balmy.

" Almost four hundred," she murmured. " Too far for you." She wriggled back. So did he. She was calm and intent, dedicated to this purpose. He was excited. He wanted that stag; but of all extraordinary things, he suddenly wanted her. *Be Quiet!* he told himself. *Have some sense.* At her bidding, he took the rifle out of its canvas cover, made sure a shell was in the breech, put on the safety catch.

" Follow me. Do what I do."

He followed her, walking when she walked, crouching when she

crouched, crawling when she crawled. The moss was cold. The stones were sharp. She had drawn a pair of knitted knee-caps out of her pocket, slipped them deftly up her legs. She thinks of everything. She's wonderful. A brown and white bird, a ptarmigan, shot low overhead like a bullet on the wind, croaked, was gone.

Fiona froze. "Bloody damn and —— it," softly and fluently, and went on. She stopped at last. "Rest till you get your breath. Mind now, aim low behind the shoulder. It's two hundred yards from here. If he's still lying I'll try to put him up. Hold straight, Digby!"

He knew how important it was to her. He would hold straight. He had taken a practice shot down at the Birks this morning, toppled a small can at a hundred. His breathing was easier.

"Good luck, Digby!" They were in a steep gully. He crawled up the side. He was making no mistake. Edged slowly inch by inch, his right eye round a rock. The stag was still lying. He slid back to tell her.

"I'll show myself higher up the gully."

He listened to her moving, hardly any noise, which was miraculous with nailed shoes on rock. She does everything better than everybody. He waited, rifle in shoulder, finger at trigger guard, safety catch off, an ivory bead and a wide V, perfect sights, ready to fire, pulse a little fast but holding steady. The stag's head still turned its watchful sweep. Something seen in Digby's left eye, a flutter of white up the gully, a handkerchief. The stag had also seen; the nose came higher; it watched, perfectly still now in that high place in sunshine above the hills.

Flutter again. Fiona was being clever, neither too cautious nor too insistent. She could read the mind of the red deer. She was the keeper of this Royal Stag. It was her charge and her quarry, her fine free beast to be sacrificed at the prime. The thing was perfect and inevitable.

The stag was standing. It stood broadside. It was the stag of Fiona's silver brooch, but in living colour—pale nose, dark swelling ruff and back, light flanks, antlers gleaming. It was magnificent.

Digby took aim. He was a good rifle shot and calm. He did not want to kill, and yet this killing would be the rightful culmination

of hard endeavour. He and Fiona had earned the trophy. He took the first pressure—just behind the shoulder, a low aim, sights steady. He began the final squeeze.

The shot sounded in a first sharp crack, then echoed from the corrie, then spread to the near hills and the farther hills and the far hills. All gave answer in reverberating clangour, loud to quiet to faint to silence. As the echoes dwindled into nothing, so the stag stiffened, crumpled and lay dead. It had not moved a yard.

Digby took his forefinger from the trigger. He heard the clatter of Fiona's shoes. He turned to watch her leap down the gully as nimbly as a chamois. Her face, always alive, spoke boundless pride and pleasure. "Oh, Digby darling," she cried, throwing herself upon him.

"It wasn't me," he said in stupefaction. "*I* didn't fire."

"*What?*"

They lay side by side while the good south wind blew against their faces, and Fiona cursed and swore in a torrent of venomous vituperation such as Digby had rarely heard from the lips of man or woman. Navy language learned at Oban.

"Sssh," he whispered. A man appeared from the far side, loped across the corrie and stood for a moment, hands on hips, wearing that unmistakable swashbuckling elegance, looking down at the stag. Then he turned his black head and called: "Come on, Madeleine!" loud and clear.

"Gimme that rifle!" hissed Fiona. She was white under tan, her mobile face working, nostrils dilated, *retroussé* tip gone pale. She stretched across.

"Steady!" said Digby. This wouldn't do, not murder or mayhem. He put his arm around her shoulder. "Steady, Fiona. Keep quiet." He patted her. For some reason or other he wanted to watch from hiding. He put up his binoculars with spare hand.

Madeleine came more slowly. She joined Balgersho. You might know that her tweeds were lately bought in a New York store which did not cater for a clientele of deer-stalkers. But she wore them to this manner born. They fitted and she fitted.

"Good shot, Madeleine," he said. The words came over the wind with the amused approving tone of his voice.

She laughed up at him. He moved quickly and in character—seized her near hand, spun her as a ballet dancer spins his partner, clipped her into his arms, kissed her by force. She seemed to struggle. Then she did not struggle. Her arms stole up around his neck. She rose on tiptoe. It was a long kiss; it spoke against the background segment of purple hills; it was in keeping with them, and in keeping with the body of the stag which came also into the field of Digby's glasses. It did somehow tell the whole primitive tale of man and woman, the twin hunters. My God, she never kissed me like that, thought Digby. Never! He was not jealous; he admired the elemental beauty; and yet he didn't much like it. He didn't much like another man being able to arouse something he had not known was in his wife. This was a violent kiss. It ended.

Hamish left her, drew a hunting knife, took the stag by one antler, raised the head, and plunged his knife into the base of the throat. Dark blood poured. When the flow had ceased, he dropped the knife, let go the head, bent, turned swiftly, and ran a bloody finger down one of Madeleine's cheeks and then the other, meeting at the chin.

"What did you do that for?" Her voice came clear and tremulous. "Why, Hamish?"

"Have to blood you for your first stag. Should be the whole face, but I let you off with a token." He laughed again. He was a splendid scamp of a fellow. "Go away while I do the gralloch." Ordered her away. She went.

Fiona's colour had come back. "Gudgey!" she ranted, but quietly. "Gudgey! Gudgey! Gudgey!" It was a violently opprobious word of her own, more expressive than all her standard oaths. "See yon white rock? That's the march. The stag's head was our side when she fired. Gudgey poachers!"

Digby saw the white rock. He also saw that the hind part of the stag lay unquestionably on Balgersho ground. The imaginary line—a thing of length and no thickness—bisected the dead beast. It was a rare case, and perhaps there would be a Highland law about it. Madeleine had poached the head; he himself would have poached the tail. He might have pointed this out to Fiona, but she was not in the mood to welcome such a statement.

" Let's beat it," he said. He was a man of peace. It would be awkward if they disclosed themselves. With Fiona panting and storming like this, there might easily be clawings or scratchings or stand-up fights. " Come on, Fiona! " He kissed her fiercely to take her mind off other passions.

It was a good enjoyable tactic, and a thing he had wanted all day to do. She came quietly. They stalked away in reverse, reached the place where they first had spied the stag, and walked on down over the bleak moss and lichen of high altitude, scrambled over rock and scree, walked again on grass, came at length to heather. The valley of the Kil lay far away below hurrying white clouds—green fields and brown, the winding river beyond moor and dark plantations.

There was a sudden ejaculation of grouse. Coveys rose and scattered frantically in all directions. The blue peregrine chose its bird, swung up and plummeted with half-closed wings, missed the jinking grouse, rose again, stooped and struck its taloned blow. Whack! You could hear it. A flurry of feathers, a lazy collapse and tumble, a bouncing. The falcon circled twice. It fed.

" Golly! " said Digby. " Some poacher, some killer, that fellow! "

She did not answer. She was still not speaking. She stopped further down, put her two little fingers in her mouth and blew a piercing whistle blast, directed at Duncan, the pony man. He had followed a long way behind with his white pony, but there would be no stag to-day for it to carry. She waved the homeward signal.

" It's her as much as him I mind," she said. " It's her like a soft carnation out of a greenhouse." This was Fiona's only reference to Madeleine. " I can't abide women," she remarked in general. " And I can't abide that stinker Hamish, and you let me down too, Digby—panting and puffing and wasting time needing to get your breath." She scowled, picked up a bit of quartz and threw it smack, splinter against rock. Fiona was far too untamed, far too close to the fierce peregrine, to the law of the jungle and the hill to be a good loser. You would not have it otherwise.

" It's sheltered here," he said, pulling her down beside him. Action was what she understood, not words. He drew her kerchief off. Her hair tumbled out and about and around.

They lay on and in the springy heather; honey bees worked

busily nearby; the south wind spoke above; the August sun struck warmly; a raven croaked somewhere among the high tops of the outer world.

"Doesn't a kilt on heather make the loveliest mattress? Doesn't it, Digby?"

"Sure does." More bees, more murmuring wind, more sun hotter and hotter, and into the clouds and out again.

"A very famous author from the Orkneys, he said once in a book that it had freed women from slavery; at least a girl called Lalage or something was talking to a man called Juan she was fond of but I suppose it was the author really who made her say that. It was my favourite book for ages and ages, and another thing he said was that American girls hold on to their dancing partners with the watertight efficiency of a limpet on a rock. Do they, Digby?"

"Dunno. Don't care."

"Outside is much the best for love." Yes, indeed. Outside upon the heather hill.

Her green eyes were open; clouds sailed across them while the whimsical devil asked one of his questions: *What is Madeleine doing now?*

"You smell of heather and you and a suspicion of Tabu."

"D'you mean to say rhymes so often, Digby?"

"Just happens to me. Just happens to me like you happen to me, Fiona. Never used to."

"Digby," later at a thoughtful time. "Let's get married, and you can do up the Birks for me and be my Ian Prissitulchan. D'you know how many sons Fiona had by Ian?"

"No clue. I'll buy it."

"Seven! And I'm only thirty Digby so I could easily manage seven if you could. But I don't want any gudgey girls. I'd drown them. I just want sons and sons and sons I bet I would too."

It was one of the things about Fiona, that you couldn't imagine her with daughters.

"Do you love me, Digby?"

"I'm crazy about you." Oh, this question women always ask, even Fiona. Love? What is it? Must it be a marriage of the minds as well? Do our minds marry?

" Digby, couldn't we be sort of unofficially engaged I mean while you're still married to that woman? I like you very much, Digby. I think I like you best of everybody ever."

Is it me she likes, or MAN she likes, or what or who? It doesn't matter. Nothing matters, neither the past nor the future, but only the golden moment. " If it would regularise, or shall I say set the seal of respectability on our union, by all means let us be unofficially engaged, Fiona."

" Consider yourself jolly lucky." She wasn't much of a girl for jokes.

" There, there, Fiona! " White clouds still swam across the firmament of iris.

" There wouldn't be any wrong in me marrying a divorced American," she mused. " Specially one of Highland stock. It wouldn't hurt the Clan. Stop it, Digby! There's something I want to ask you. Please change your mind and wear the kilt to-morrow."

This for the tenth time. " No."

" Please Darling Digby just for me. Daddy was your size. I know it would fit, and it's the Hunting Kilburnie, the same as the one that I've been wearing. You'd look so braw marching at my side and making your speech. Answer me first, Digby."

That goddam speech again. What the hell was he going to say?

" I tell you what, Digby. We'll go down and try it on. It's such a waste of a kilt not to wear it, especially at the Gathering and when you have a grand body for it with muscles and bones in the right place and legs like oaks. Now kiss me again."

Quite a long while later, he stood in Fiona's room before the mirror and suffered Nanny's chalkings and pinnings while she crooned to herself and him. " Just a half-inch all round, mebbe three-quarters at the back. Och, Mr. Ross has a rare outstanding build for the kilt. The jacket—sleeves out an inch, and more room in the ocksters. And the bonnet's ower ticht for comfort. I'll open the back a wee thing. There now! " She stood back and surveyed him with pride. Fiona lounged on the bed. She was in high good humour. She had forgotten all about the stag. Digby looked in the mirror. He hated the idea; he had been had for a sucker; and yet this kilt certainly suited him. He admired himself and made deprecating coy comments.

" The knees are a bit white," Fiona doubted.

" I'll soon sort yon," said Nanny. " I've a bottle up the stair."

" Now walk up and down, Digby."

He did so, over to the row of brown-kneed dolls, back to fat indulgent Nanny, over and back. " Give it a sort of jerk, Digby, like a punch back and a sway out from that buttock each time you put your foot down. Watch me! That's much better. Use the muscles of yer loins. That's fine. Now when you stand, put the left heel into the right instep and bend the left knee. My goodness you're a quick learner."

" I'll only wear this kilt on condition that you say nothing about it beforehand, that I can change here and not at Glendrogan, and that I can take it off right away after the Gathering."

" Darling, of course you can take it off the very moment after."

" The new bike is the bonniest I ever had, and three speeds an'a'. Mr. Ross is a kind good gentleman, the very man for my Bebby, I'm thinkin'." Nanny went away.

He loosened the unfamiliar straps.

" Oh, I'm so terribly specially happy you gave way about the kilt. Come here, Digby."

" Have a heart, Fiona. I must get back." He dressed quickly and gave her a friendly kiss. Nearly four thousand feet up and down. He had done his fair share and no kidding. " What time shall I come to-morrow? "

" Twelve-thirty would be fine. I'm sleepy, Digby. I think I'll have a snooze. Good-bye if you have to go."

He parked in the shade of the copper beech, and sat there while the wind died at evening. Grey limbs and twigs eased in their swaying overhead; leaves danced a chinked lighthearted measure.

It had been a day of failure and achievement, and the day was not yet done, and now in a few minutes he would have to grapple finally with that speech. Subscriptions, speeches, the wearing of the kilt. *The best things in life are free*, somebody said in a song. Not true. *The best things in life cost money or endeavour. Better face it.*

And here's another thing, he thought in his contemplative mood of languor. You don't want too much success. Sufficient unto one

day is the storming of Fiona. Good, that. It's taken me a long time to learn that success is not achieving all the things you started out to do. Our American mistake. There is no happiness in a totality of achievement. We have to learn that failure is the happy handmaiden. We have to not get our stag. We'll get another one some other afternoon. I'm much much happier than I would have been if I had conquered all along the line.

I'm an immoral guy and I'm very happy, quite cured of melancholia. Can't believe I ever had it. A day of great physical effort, and a good deal of it wasted. The intellectual effort still remains to do. I can feel it ready to go not only in my fanciful head but in my tired body too. I will make one helluva good speech to-morrow. All I need now is the key to unlock the door to set me composing at a gallop. *The theme :* Clan Kilburnie. *The Protagonist :* Our glorious chieftain. *The watchword :* Inspiration. But how?

Balgersho's plane glided in overhead and side-slipped like a winged crab to land across the field. He could put that thing into a helicopter park. He could take off round corners. Peer of the realm and peerless pilot, and you ought to be very cross indeed at him for dallying with your wife. Good old Fiona wanting to be unofficially engaged. Sometimes she could be quite like her ordinary sisters. Not often. The plane roared away.

Madeleine came up towards the front door. She was limping badly, and her mouth twitched at each step. But although there was this small evidence of pain, the message of her face, flushed from the sun and wind, was an abstracted pleasure. She did not see him in the car in his shady nook.

" Hallo there," he called, getting out. " Bad blisters? "

Madeleine started, then looked at him. " Hallo, Digby." she said as if he was some casual acquaintance; and her face brightened; " I did the hat trick. It was worth the blisters. I got a royal stag and a grouse and a twelve-pound salmon."

He didn't mind the stag. But the hat trick? No, he wasn't so pleased about that.

" Congratulations," he said. " You've certainly taken to the sporting life like a duck to water, bit of a lame duck perhaps. I see you washed that blood off."

"How . . . ?" She stared at him, then blushed in a warm guilty tide. It was most becoming. It brought a memory to him of long ago when they were courting and not yet engaged and if they met at parties or anywhere at all, even in the park, she would blush; she would always blush without fail.

Madeleine was a genuine person then, and we really were in love, weren't we? I don't feel it, but I can remember. I can remember that unbelievable first time when love was innocence, and love was eyes linking across a roomful of non-existent people. We never did learn to build the bridge from rhapsody to completion. We never did, and was it my fault for being Digby Prissy? Was it my fault she turned into, turned out to be a bogus frigid intellectual? But she wasn't exactly frigid with Balgersho. That could have been an act too. Everything could be a ham-actor's act with Madeleine.

He had been happy, but now he felt bitter. He laughed and said: "I was a privileged spectator. I hope you had a swell time."

"I hope you had a swell time too." Her lips trembled. Perhaps with a smile or perhaps not. She limped slowly to the house, turned at the door, stuck her tongue out at him and said: "You poor old red-nosed sucker."

Her Fifth Avenue rustic appearance, her sickening behaviour with the Colonel, her dancing around the lawn, her lust for the chase, her dumb remarks, even her behaviour on the summit of Ben McKercher —all these could be woman's tricks or posturings, being more French than the Frogs, more Italian than the Eyeties, more Scots than the haggis. But to turn around like that and call him a *poor old red-nosed sucker!* Why, it was plain crazy. Why, it was a word she shuddered even to hear. *I do wish you wouldn't use those common expressions, Digby.* Sticking her tongue out too. It was like the Bishop standing in the pulpit and starting his sermon: *Hiya, bums!* It was that unexpected. She must be nuts.

Digby stood fingering his nose which was painfully fiery from too much sun among the heather, and considering all this until the Colonel hailed him: "What ho, Digby P.! Come and see my gentians."

He was leaning on his shepherd's crook in the rock garden. "Did

you ever see such a beauty? Gentiana Pontifex, straight from the Appalachians. Well, that's one good thing as well as dollars. Such an extraordinary vivid blue. I do adore it."

You could see that he adored it. The Colonel loved food and drink and lilies and gentians and Damon Runyon and India. These seemed to be his genuine passions. Also he must have loved the late cousin Mona.

"It certainly is a pretty one," said Digby. He was still thinking about mad Madeleine.

"Pretty! I abominate the word, a sucker's word. Better say swell than pretty, Digby P."

So he had heard that exchange with Madeleine. Gudgey, yes gudgey old eavesdropper in the words of Fiona. So what the hell.

"I'm glad to report that all is quiet on the kitchen front. Mother Moloney gave me a spanking luncheon of sweetbreads cooked in wine; oh scrumptious! She's a wizard, that woman. She's a wizard old wizard of Oz as far as my stomach is concerned, a handsome old wizard too. She loves my stomach, Digby P."

"So I observed last night. It's a very very rewarding thing for a man to have a well-loved stomach, Colonel."

"You'll be a wit before we know where we are. Well, as I say, things are good cuisinewise—and long may it continue—but Bridget Moloney does have the artistic temperament—ordered Elspeth out of the kitchen this morning. Can't say I blame her. I confess that m'daughter is the most maddening hanger-around."

"Elspeth never stops working. I think you rather take her for granted."

"Do you now? But enough of the dull Galbraiths, the taken-for-granted hosts. Speak to me of glamour. How did you four get on with your competition?"

"Madeleine shot a stag at the top of McKercher. She also got a grouse and a salmon. We got nothing." Short and explicit.

"She's a remarkably gifted girl, that, a typical American woman, turning her hand to anything. But never mind losing, Ross. We can't always win. We must take the rough with the smooth in life. You know I'm awfully glad to see you four young people teaming up so happily. Fiona and you, Madeleine and Hamish. Friendship

is such a rare thing between the sexes." The Colonel stooped to pluck out a weed, straightened. "Why so glum, Digby P.?"

"I was thinking of that speech I have to make." He was, and also thinking about the Colonel's enthusiasm for friendship. Digby's mind was a butterfly from flower to flower, from gentian to lily, and he really must get down to it.

"Talking of speeches, did I ever tell you about the time Mona and I were after ibex in the Himalayas? Well, we climbed for days and days from a place called Kalimpong towards the Tibetan border. There was a marvellous head I spotted in a nullah, and we gave chase for five days, but it was too steep—we couldn't get down after him, simply maddening. By the end of it we were nearly at eighteen thousand on the top of this bloody ridge and still no way down and Mona was thoroughly browned off. *Look here, Farquhar.* I can hear her saying it now. *I've had enough of this. Call the shikari.*

"We were in our tent, I remember, and it was dark and for once there wasn't a breath of wind and you could see the hills rolling away down south for ever in the moonlight, and if you looked the other way you saw Kanchenjunga—twenty-eight thousand feet of snow and precipice untrod by man. Oh, I do wish I could see that mountain just once more. It spoils you for every other view in the world." The Colonel sighed.

"Where was I? Well, the shikari arrived in his blanket and salaamed Mona like nobody's business. They were all scared stiff of her, and I must say I don't wonder. Sometimes I was a bit windy myself.

"*Tell him he's gotten us into a hopeless position,* she said. It was odd about the word gotten. Mona eradicated her American accent entirely; you would have taken her for English anywhere, but she never managed to break herself of Gotten. *Tell him I don't believe a word of this about finding a way down into the nullah.*

"So I told him, and the poor chap literally trembled from head to foot. He pleaded at me with those sad eyes they have, and said: *Say to the bahut bari bahadri Memsahib, the great big brave Memsahib, that to-morrow morning we reach the place where the holy man speaks.*"

"I really ought to be going in, Colonel," said Digby. This tale of the tartar Mona could go on all night.

" Won't be a minute, my boy, almost finished. I always remember that night at eighteen thousand, Digby P. You might think Mona was a trifle domineering. Well, perhaps she was in public worldly matters. But when we were alone together, she was absolutely different. Oh, Mona was a wonderful wife to me. She kept me in order but she loved me to be the private boss. I was quite a reasonable chap in those days.

" Next morning we followed the ridge for another mile, still climbing. We turned a corner and if you please, would you believe it, do you know what we saw? The holy man himself sitting starko at the mouth of a cave facing Kanchenjunga. It was cold up there, I can tell you, but he might have been in the Bahamas. He wasn't an old chap—about your age, Digby P. He was chanting the way they do, on and on like a dirge.

" That was the holy man. Much more important, however, a path zigzagged from this very place down the khudside four or five thousand feet into the bottom of the nullah. We could see it all the way. Mona nodded to the shikari: *You are doing better. Keep it up.* She always gave them credit when they deserved it.

" Meanwhile the Guru, faquir, sadhu or swami, call him what you will, went on chanting in some strange language . . ."

" Look, Colonel . . ."

" Patience, boy. This isn't Wall Street. Well, there was something about him that annoyed Mona and intrigued her too. *Disgusting exhibitionism*, she said, and turned to lead the way downhill after that ibex—I got him in the end incidentally. But she changed her mind and stopped. *Farquhar*, she said. *Ask that vulgar creature what he's going on about.*

" I must say I boggled a bit because I was always nervous of disturbing those holy chaps in case they got annoyed and cast a spell on me. Superstition, of course. But there was no saying nay to Mona once her mind was made up, so I went over and stood beside him. *What is your speech about, Panditji?* I asked politely in Hindustani.

" His eyes didn't even flicker, and he went on: *Galapagadi poroola, intakalahi guddle guddle sorokamadi*, something like that. He was a good-looking chap too, despite the ashes, a Brahmin I dare say, not

unlike you in appearance when I come to think of it, Digby P. *Ask him again!* called Mona.

"I did. *Panditji. Memsahib puchta-hai, ap kya bolte hain? The Lady asks what you're speaking about,* honorific plural, very courteous.

"Well, he did stop chanting, but he never took his eyes off Kanchenjunga, and would you believe it, he answered me in fair English. *Tell woman,* he said loudly. *My speech is poem.* Then he went smack on with *Galapagadi* and all the rest of it. Mona wasn't best pleased, I can tell you. *The impertinence,* she said, *calling a Memsahib, Woman.* But she got her answer. My dear Mona always did get her answer. We started down the path."

"*My speech is poem,*" Digby said. "*My speech is poem.*" It was a blinding and beautiful revelation, so simple now that it had come, so clear and vivid, explaining a thousand things, all that had happened and was meant to happen. He saw the predestined dagger of his purpose. He saw how he would wield it in his good right hand. He saw the beginning, the sure middle, and the end. "I want paper," he said. "Foolscap. I want it right away."

"Whassamatter? What's got into you, Digby P.?"

"Hurry up!" he said, issuing the commands of exaltation. "Find it for me."

The Colonel came quietly and found paper. "Here you are, old boy. Is that enough? Are you all right? Do you want a drink?" He was worried, fussing around.

"No. I want coffee in my room. Tell somebody to bring it up. And later I should eat. Yes, send me dinner too. Otherwise I must not be disturbed."

"Oh dear, oh dear;" sighed the Colonel. "It's a strange bloody world. I don't know what Bridget Moloney's going to say."

"That's *your* problem," Digby said. It was perhaps the first unprovoked rudeness of his adult years. Even Miss Prendergast had provoked him. But it was not rudeness; it was the blind compulsion of the muse which had been waiting and growing all to this bursting moment of his life.

He sat at a table in the North wing of Glendrogan. He wrote. He finished at two a.m.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

DIGBY PAUSED. He heard the long sigh of the Kilburnies. They sat around the granite amphitheatre walls—lads in kilts and tartaned lassies, men in suits and summery women, old ones and young, folks from Scotland, exiles from across the border, pilgrims from beyond the oceans, all of them come here to the meeting place of Clan Kilburnie, to renew on this one day an ancient fealty. They bore marks of the lands of their adoption, marks of climate and racial brew and custom—lean leathery Antipodeans, ebullient rainbows from America, sturdy conventional Canucks—these and all the rest. And yet they were one family to-day, joined in heart and spirit to their Chieftain.

Fiona had never looked so beautiful. Her blouse was a simple thing of snowy silk, neckline plunging to the brooch, that silver sentinel. Kilt, nylons, shoes, quite plain and perfect. Let lesser beauties wear the frills.

The pipers had played their marches, pibrochs, reels, strathspeys, all culminating in the Clan Quickstep—*the Bonny Birks o' Burnie.* The dancers had done sword-dance, broadswords, reels, shiun triubhas and fling. Fiona had received her clansmen, from patriarchs to little tots. It was a Kilburnie from the South of France who set the fashion for the men. He bowed low to kiss her hand. The idea caught on like wildfire; soon everyone was doing it, gauchely or gallantly according to his bent, or according to consumption of Birks Royal Whisky. But there was no rowdiness. Fiona's own mood of queenly dignity lay over every step of the proceedings.

The luncheon, piping, dancing—all that was over. A few minutes ago she had stood beside him on Chieftain's Rock, the high place

where only he had been invited, and she said: *Now the time is come to call upon our kinsman from America, the last bearer of a famous name, the Great Digby Prissitulchan Ross.* Cheers volleyed, echoed, died.

He told them the story of the Bloody Gorge. He told it in the words which had poured torrentially out of brain through fingers to his pen last night, and were now so vividly to mind that he had not glanced at the copy in his hand.

He had nearly done. He paused for these few seconds to watch wrapt faces, to feel silence, to taste the witchery. The only sound was a rippling rap and tuck of the Kilburnie Standard overhead. Digby was strong. He spoke again.

Are these my words? he thought, hearing his voice sail on now to the end. *Did my mind do this extraordinary thing? Can it be me, an American executive named Ross?*

But he had finished. Nobody stirred. Even the standard hung inert.

Digby put the poem in his sporran, which had a handy pocket, and took Fiona's hand. She rose to stand beside him. With his left hand he made a small gesture of command, palm upwards, fingers spread. The whole assembly stood.

" On your behalf I dedicate this poem to another Fiona, another Chieftain." He held her hand high. " To our glorious Fiona Kilburnie of the Birks." Then Digby kissed her long slim fingers which were like all things about her—wonderful and ambivalent, strongly supple in the hunt, softy supple in caress, unspoilt by roughening household chore.

" *BRAW KILBURNIE!* " the clan motto, shouted in homage. And again: " *BRAW KILBURNIE!* "

She smiled at him. " Och, thank you, Digby," inclining her head as good Queen Bess to Essex sort of thing, or great Victoria to faithful Brown who knows. That nod was blessing, thanks, dismissal.

He knew his place. He stepped into the background, leaving her alone on the main pinnacle of Chieftain's Rock, facing tumultuous plaudits from her clan. Cheer after cheer rang and resounded and sped against the hills.

Nobody heard the approach of a small blue monoplane along the glen. One moment human voices shouting as transported men have

shouted since the dawn of time, bass, contralto, tenor, treble in strong harmony—the next a rasping over-riding blatter of this tortured age.

Digby drew breath. He watched Fiona. He saw her body stiffen, hands clench at her sides, the arm muscles rounding.

Oh dear, he thought, jerked out of his exultant dream, if it was a dream, if it was not the most real bright moment of his life. *Here's that goddam four-flusher gonna ball things up.*

Lord Balgersho did just this. First he buzzed Chieftain's Rock at zero feet straight for the hillside, standing on his tail at the ultimate split-second, fading in a stall turn, quite unbelievably dangerous to himself and them. Digby longed to dive down flat upon the rock, but he could not do so honourably, for Fiona stood with squared shoulders, not yielding an inch even when the backwash threw auburn hair awry. She was magnificent; she showed a chieftain's guts. I wish I could see her from the front, he thought. He liked her from every angle, but when she was angry, her front-view was much the most inspiring.

Balgersho then did every trick in his incomparable repertoire. He put on a display such as can rarely have been equalled—loops, slow rolls, flips to inverted flight and flips back, vertical turns, whole circuits upside down, stalls and sickening spins, dives, falling leaves—all this within, over and round the rock walls of the amphitheatre.

It was frightening, and most of the Kilburnies lay flat at one time or another. But, except for the initial buzz quite manifestly aimed at Digby and Fiona, you could not say this was deliberate insult and outrage by Balgersho against Kilburnie. It was a superb free exhibition of stunt flying.

He finished with one of his sideslips, so steep that you could hear the whine of air on wings, righted the plane, throttled back to a near-stall, and followed the circle of prostrate Kilburnies. As he did so, a white fluttering shower streamed from the right-hand window, some clinging momentarily to the rudder, most flying free, floating slowly, prettily, haphazardly in the light breeze down to earth.

The plane flew round at eye level to Chieftain's Rock. Digby was amazed to see a woman's face through the open cabin window, and a pair of hands still busily expelling paper. Madeleine was very pale. As she went past at forty miles per hour, she put a thumb to her nose,

fingers extended in that most vulgar of all beastly childhood gestures.

" A-a-ch-ch," he heard Fiona spit. Then the blue plane was gone. It turned at the far side, raced with full power in a repetition of the first dangerous impertinence, cracked overhead, wingtip a foot from the flagstaff, roared high, right up and over the hill in the same manœuvre Digby remembered from a few days ago when he had been a reluctant hunter of the eagle.

Madeleine! he thought. *Madeleine who's airsick at the least bump. Madeleine who hates flying. Why, the mad bastard might have killed her! She's nuts. She's altogether cuckoo.*

Before the small-engined roar had died, Kilburnies came to life. They sat up, stood, looked round with slack shocked faces, perhaps not sure whether the terrifying display had been a surprise item in the programme. Then they grasped at the relief of action. Each and everyone picked up a piece of paper.

Some were lying on and round the Chieftain's Rock. Digby collected two. " Gimme! " snarled Fiona. The tip of her nose was pale, nostrils dilated, always a dangerous sign.

He put one in her hand, looked at the other. It was a single sheet, a pamphlet such as is dropped on enemy countries in time of war, but with a different purpose. Those have as aim political seduction —this aimed at mortal insult. A six-inch piece of paper bearing a single picture—it was the golden stag of Fiona's brooch, of the Kilburnie Standard, broadside, head turned. The nose was a daub of vivid red. Underneath were these lines:

Oh Prissy with your nose so bright
Why won't you ride my bike to-night?

It was a monstrous insult to Kilburnie; it was a monstrous insult to him. Digby instinctively felt his nose—not usually red; it never had been a red nose except on rare occasions when it peeled; true it was peeling now. Furthermore, this pamphlet was a reminder of his clash with the law—an incident he particularly wanted to forget. Nor was it without a certain moral, or immoral implication.

Digby hissed. He knew what he was going to do; he was going to square up to Hamish Balgersho, so-called peer and goddam baron; he was going to bust him wide open.

Down there the Kilburnies had looked and read and looked again in silence. But now a growl ran round the amphitheatre. They could not know the full purport; they knew about Rudolph, though; they knew this for sacrilege.

Fiona crushed her pamphlet, threw it away, spread both arms high as in the letter U of semaphore. Her short-sleeved blouse fell back to the tanned ripple of her shoulders, showed naked arch of armpits. Silence fell at once.

Now, as never before, she was the angry priestess. "Yon was Tarr!" she cried. "The curséd Tarr of Balgersho!" Her arms were wonderfully graceful and expressive, flung wide, flung high. "Form up! All able-bodied men get in the ranks!" She bounded tempestuously two steps at a time down into the arena. Digby followed. Every strong male Kilburnie, even some older men, came at the double and formed two ranks. They had been stirred by the doings of the day. They had been aroused by Digby's epic poem. An ancient never-forgotten grudge had been inflamed. Now the perfidious Tarr himself had fanned the embers to red heat, to flame, to white-hot passion. You could see it in their snarling faces. They were raring to go.

"Bairns and womenfolk bide here!" their Chieftain cried. "Pipes in the lead till we reach the Bloody Gorge. Revenge!"

"Revenge!" they answered deeply.

"Prissitulchan at my side. March on Balgersho! Left turn. Quick march!"

The pipers broke into the Bonny Birks o' Burnie; the drums gave tart emphasis of measure, the column swung out of the arena, down past the East Tower of the Birks on that fine afternoon of a mid-century Gathering. Three miles to the Gorge, a mile beyond—four miles in all to go, one good hour's march at the resilient clip Fiona set. She marched like a soldier, or perhaps a sailor—shoulders square, chin in, chest out, arms swinging to regulation height. Digby stole surreptitious glances at her now and then. She's a swell marcher too, he thought.

He did not feel self-conscious in his kilt, for kilts were in the majority to-day. None of us human sheep do feel self-conscious in majority. He practised the lesson she had taught him, jutting each

buttock with an aggressive thrust which made him feel tremendously a highland man. He was a quick learner, as Fiona had remarked; he was getting good at it already.

His thoughts were very much confused. First, he had been drained in mind at the giving out of so much virtue. Then he had been strangely shocked by the sight of Madeleine in that plane, and by her rude uncharacteristic gesture. Then Balgersho had made a guy of him, had found out his prissy nickname—who from but Madeleine? Then he had felt resentment that he should have been the one to pick on—he, Digby Ross, who had been persuaded to make financial contributions, to attend the Gathering, to give a speech, to wear the kilt. He knew he was a fool to do it, and his worst fears were borne out. He even felt a certain pique against Fiona who had been entirely innocent throughout, thinking only of others' welfare—of being a mother to her clan.

All these thoughts danced about his high-wrought mind—much stronger was the physical satisfaction of marching with Fiona, the cold-hot primeval thrill of wailing pipes, the need to get down after that smart-guy Hamish and sock him: *one—two, straight left, right hook upon his sneering kisser.* Digby half-practised the rhythm of the blows.

Fiona turned. " You shouldn't bend your arms when marching, Digby," she said in loud but not unkind rebuke above the pipes.

" Sorry, Fiona," He swung them straight, thinking how very near and yet how far withdrawn her face seemed now.

And now right turn at the village crossing where a policeman stood, none other than Constable McIntoon. He sprang to attention, saluted smartly, a respectful smile hovering below his waxed moustaches. Fiona paid no heed, but Digby smiled back. Poor old McIntoon, he thought. I don't bear *him* a grudge.

They were passing that succession of pools and fast water—the Shepherd's, Bannock, Carry, and here now was the Piper's and two familiar figures at the roadside. *I've changed my mind. Don't believe I will come, Digby P. I wouldn't want to put you off your stroke. Speak well, my boy.* Quite respectful.

Tall bearded MacLagan, short fat Colonel. The former raised his fisherman's hat, bowed gravely. The latter suddenly clicked heels,

jack-knifed his right arm up and out to National-Socialist salute, the very image of some loathsome corpulent Gauleiter. "Heil Ross!" he shouted, damn him.

Fiona growled. The Gorge lay close ahead, a black forbidding cleft. Just about here, this must be the place where the first Fiona and her Prissitulchan had taken love's young excursion by the river.

They had marched three miles. By this time some of the weaker spirits or less active bodies might be flagging. Far from it. They were welded into a tight unit, a fanatical army; they would follow their Chieftain through exhaustion to the death. The feeling was intangible, immensely strong. She had required only to say *Revenge!* and they were hers. I bet she burns Balgersho to the ground, thought Digby. That at the very least. No killings though, I hope. He would have liked to say a word of caution about this, but did not dare. She was his mistress in more ways than one.

"Pipes and drums get off the road," Fiona ordered, pointing to the parking place just this side of the gorge.

Digby ran forward to do her bidding. He knew the piper who was boss, Andrew Kilburnie, Pipe-Major and something of an old curmudgeon. Up here beside him, the squeals were terrible, assailing eardrums. Digby shouted his message. The wild music stopped. Andrew led them off the road.

"Halt!" called Fiona. Digby went back to join the ranks. She looked at him, yet through him too. Her bosom heaved under the silken blouse; the sun shone through her hair; her long legs met perfectly at knee and calf and ankle. This was the symbolic moment.

"Play the Bonny Birks," she called to Andrew, and waited till Pipes and Drums were once more ready. "Quick March!"

They marched to meet that intoxicating melody of battle, and passed the Band, and here was the very entrance to the Bloody Gorge.

"Come away, Prissitulchan!" She took his hand, broke into double time, and together they ran just as the first rays of the westering sun struck into that desolate forbidding place where the river hissed grumbled scudded close below, the right wall rose vertical from water, and on the left steep scree from the roadside to a precipice; high overhead a raven wheeled, bird of ill-omen.

Digby glanced over his shoulder. They had left the clansmen far behind. They were half-way through.

But what was this? A blue plane came roaring up the gorge, bucking and twisting in the turbulent airs, a few feet clearance between wingtips and rock.

It all happened in a few twinklings of an eye. Out of the starboard window came a white object, a carton or the like, thrown down to strike the road. A second followed as the plane shot overhead. Three, four, five, six, seven, eight of the objects were expelled. All found the road, which was impossible to miss. The last few landed right in the Kilburnie column.

He looked dazedly again at the first carton—quite a small thing like those American pint receptacles for milk, made of waxed cardboard. It had burst open. A yellowish liquid was spreading on the road; from it came now a most intolerable stink, a stench of rotten eggs and worse, a fetor he remembered well from Lab. experiments in school at Groton. It was the smell of Sulphuretted Hydrogen, H_2S, nauseous, nose-gripping.

Digby held his breath and acted quickly. He was the one who took the initiative, pulling Fiona with him down the road, past the worst of it, and on thirty or forty yards until the odour was no more than a horrible miasma.

The plane circled above the gorge, flew east again and out of sight. They looked upstream. Chaos reigned. The orderly column of Kilburnies had broken up. Bent figures scuttled in aimless little circles on the road, scrambled up the scree; one clansman fell into the river, by a miracle clambered out. Then all were blundering away against the sun. It was rout of Kilburnies by Balgersho, the whole thing planned with fiendish cunning, executed with atrocious skill—the timing of it all, the diabolical enticement.

" Gudgey! " she ranted. " Gudgey stinker! " An apt description. Then: " Gudgey cowards! " about her liege-men, the last of whom had staggered out of sight.

But this was not fair. No human being, however devoted and determined, could have braved that battery of stink-bombs. " I didn't mean it," she said, repenting. " Come on then, Digby! "

Even if they had wished to do so, they could not turn back.

But Digby needed no urging. He had been battle-keen before; he was battle-lusting now.

They stepped on to the bridge just below the confluence of merry Bal and sombre Kil. He swung Fiona Kilburnie of the Birks into his arms for a last pre-combat kiss. He felt her strain to him, hold him in her woman's strength. It was one of those rare kisses stamped for ever in the mind and senses. It was love's bugle to the battle.

" Come away! " They raced along Balgersho road, swung left at the widening of the glen. Ahead were the battlements of Balgersho Castle, derelict too, slightly less enormous than the Birks. It was a hotch-potch of a dozen architectural styles, Scottish Baronial being the last and worst, a hideous Christmas-pudding of a house, but not Balgersho's current residence—that was a bungalow, an aluminium pre-fab, tucked into trees beyond the landing field. He admitted, indeed boasted of having got it in some racket at a time of desperate housing shortage through a buddy in the Ministry of Health. *It's me or the other chap*, he remarked. *Look after number One's my motto, Digby. Don't you agree, old boy?—Sure, sure*, you answered weakly, not that Balgersho would give a damn what you or anybody thought. He was that kind of shameless SOB.

The plane was coming in to land. It stopped just as Digby and Fiona reached the field. Hamish and Madeleine got out. He moved forward to fiddle with the engine cowling. Madeleine stood beside him. They were laughing, but neither looked in this direction.

" Leave him to me, Fiona," Digby said as they closed the distance. " This is my account. Now, promise! "

" Och," she contralto-growled, pale again around the nose. Her teeth made a chattering of rage. But she muttered: " All right," in recognition of his champion-status.

Madeleine turned first. " Gracious," she said after a silent moment. " Here's Rudolph in his kilt."

" You shut up! " Digby snarled; and a strong thought ran through him: It isn't me. I'm not Digby Ross, head of one of our greatest American Corporations. *Daddy Loon's head of a Corporation*, said that facetious character, Jake Doon. No, I'm the Urtyp, throwback to primeval man.

Balgersho straightened from the engine. A smile spread over his

face in the way you had thought so lively and charming that first evening. "Hallo, Digby old boy," he said. "Hallo, Queenie. Fancy seeing you."

Now that the moment was here, Digby felt calm. The small shivering tremor and dryness of his mouth—these were the pumpings of adrenalin. He slowly took off his jacket which had belonged to the previous Kilburnie Chieftain. "You'd better get ready," he said politely. "I intend to remove that smile from your face."

Balgersho laughed. "Have some sense," he said. "All in jest, Digby my dear chap."

"I've taken a bellyful in the way of jest from you," said Digby. "Are you scared?" He handed the jacket to Fiona. He watched Balgersho's face. The smile stiffened a little, lost mobility.

"You never did have a sense of humour," Madeleine remarked. "You've always been a prissy little prig."

"Shut up!" This from Fiona. The women glared at one another.

"Keep quiet, both of you," said Hamish in his lordly way. "No hair-scratching. Look, Digby, old boy, I like you very much. You're the last chap I want to sock. What's all the fuss about?"

"You're a crook is what the fuss is all about. And you're scared."

Balgersho's face darkened slightly, but he kept on smiling. "Well, if that's it," he said, and removed his jacket. Madeleine took it from him. What an extraordinary situation. "Come on, chum, I don't want to fight you, but I can't take that. Withdraw." He was still not bellicose.

Digby did not answer. He assumed a pugilistic stance.

"I'd better warn you I boxed welter for the Raff."

"I'd better warn you I fought heavyweight for Harvard." This was totally untrue. Digby had taken lessons at one point, but never fought anyone in his adult life except one Copper Jamieson and Constable McIntoon. Both knock-outs. A lie, but he knew the value of morale in warfare.

They circled one another on the grass field beside the plane in the presence of two lovely seconds.

Balgersho had a loose and limber crouch, chin tucked behind his guard. He smiled, but it was not a pretty smile. He led a left to the mark. Digby blocked it, tried to duck the right cross, took that on

the side of his head, painful, perhaps painful to Balgersho's knuckles too.

Digby tried his own left. It didn't connect, but it told him something—that he had a big advantage in reach. That and thirty pounds in weight. He made his plan! I'll hold him off with my left. I'll lead and lead and lead for the body till I wear him out—then take the opening.

Sound in theory, not good in practice. His enemy was far too quick; he feinted, came in underneath, and the next thing was smack-smack to the jaw. Digby's world swam round and he was sitting on the grass. He shook his head to clear it. "Get up!" Fiona urged.

"Had enough?" asked Hamish, weaving around on the balls of his feet. "Scared?"

"You'll see!" He was okay again. First tactics wrong; the swine was far too good. What now? Only one hope—slug it out; wear him down; make him stand and fight. Digby panted. He was in fair good shape despite the exactions of the heather hill and so on.

He went after him in furious onslaught, raining blows against Balgersho's body, giving him no time, connecting once, and then again to the face, taking a nasty one to the stomach and another, a low blow, and red lights shimmered up before Digby's eyes; but he was cold too, he was calculating, he had seen something. Fight foul, was it? Okay.

He gasped for breath and showered arm-heavy rights and lefts, driving Balgersho backwards by sheer weight. *Got to be now*, he thought. *Or I'm dead meat.*

What he had seen was a cluster of six-inch grassy tussocks beyond Balgersho. *All's fair, and this is both love and war, so doubly fair.* He crowded in close. It was the only chance. Balgersho's left heel caught the first stiff clump of grass; he tripped, recovered but not soon enough. He was still off-balance when his right heel came against the second tussock. His guard spread open. Digby was there. He used his right. It was a far better blow than the one he had dealt the envious McIntoon. Lord Balgersho finally stopped smiling; he subsided and lay asleep. Digby sucked his knuckles; they were torture.

Fiona ran up. "Oh, Digby!" she cried. "You did it for us.

You avenged the Massacre. You wiped it off the slate. Four hundred years to the very day. Och, Prissitulchan!" She put her hand on his right shoulder. It was the accolade.

"You fouled him!" Madeleine was kneeling beside Balgersho. The peer began to stir. She looked over her shoulder. "You did it on purpose. I saw you." Her voice was clear and cold and angry.

"He hit me low," said Digby, not denying the accusation, not at all ashamed, but wanting to make that clear. "Didn't he, Fiona?"

Fiona made no reply. She was staring at Hamish Balgersho, who had opened his eyes and now sat up. She was staring at him with an extraordinary fixity. Her bosom rose and fell under the silk. She was mistress of this situation, as of every other.

"You're a bloody old scoundrel," said the wicked Baron. "But I must admit you pack a hefty punch." He fingered his jaw with rueful tenderness. Then he transferred attention to Fiona. He gave her back what she gave him, which was a stare of challenging intensity. It went on through potent seconds. "My elephant Queen," he said at last in that mocking superior way of his. "What's on your little mind?"

Fiona panted, but otherwise was still, coiled like a tigress just before the spring. *She's going to kill him*, Digby thought. *She's going to administer the coup de grâce.* Which was only to be expected when you considered Fiona's elemental make-up. She would never be wholly satisfied by the service of a champion. She had it in for Hamish from way-back.

But enough was enough. The poor guy was down, and still in sorry shape. "Steady, Fiona," Digby said, putting a restraining hand on the heaving opulence of her shoulder. She brushed it off absently, much as she might have swotted at a fly.

"I was thinking," she said tightly, staring. Then she strode over to stand above him.

Madeleine moved away towards the plane. She must have sensed the charge; it filled the air, as of ten thousand volts building to leap a gap. Digby glanced at her momentarily. She frowned a little. But he and Madeleine, the plane, the river near at hand, the white dots of sheep baa-ing upon McKercher's east face, the high peak in a fleece of cloud, the deeper blue of distant hills, the ephemeral bungalow

below Balgersho Castle—all were trivial props to this drama, this culmination of the ages. *Violence!* it shouted.

"Well?" said Hamish, looking up at her. He wore no amiable mask. He looked what he was—a totally ruthless man, a cunning patrician ne'er-do-well, a guy who did what he wanted if he wanted it enough. Odd, very odd to see it now just after he had been knocked out in fair, almost fair, fight by a better scrapper. "Have you seen sense?"

"We beat you," she said. "We had our vengeance. Och, Hamish!"

Now the astounding thing occurred. Fiona dived upon him. In a sense it was attack, but by no means the attack that Digby had expected. She wrestled with her rival chieftain on the good green grass; she covered him with kisses. Madeleine hissed and turned her back. Digby watched in baffled stupor.

Finally Balgersho freed himself. "That'll do," he said.

"Och, Hamie," she sighed. "To think I never guessed you were the one I loved. My Hielan' Laddie, and the feud's all over."

"Don't call me Hamie. Above all, stop using these barbarous expressions."

"And don't you call me Queenie," she gave back with heat.

But this masterful villain clipped her into his arms again, turned her over, and spanked her on the kilted bottom. "If I want to call you Queenie, I shall call you Queenie," he remarked. "From now on I'm the boss. I call the tune. When I say: *Do this*, you bloody well do it."

"I'll not do a thing without marriage," she said stoutly with a quaver. "I won't let you, Hamish."

"Marriage it shall be, and the sooner the better. But no more philandering, Fiona. Enough's enough. Your salad days are over."

Her salad days with Digby Ross, the man who paid up and looked a fool and fought her battles and won a bridegroom for her and was cast away without even a murmur of regret or thanks.

But you know, he thought. I never even at the wildest moments, I never liked to think of marriage with Fiona. It may be all right for this crook Hamish, but it would hardly do for me. Think of Fiona at the Staff Christmas party. Think of her wearing a kilt in

New York City. Think of her arrogance with Directors' wives. Just think of her tantrum language. No, it's a funny thing, but my heart's not broken. I'm just the faintest bit relieved. The pace was far too hot to last, you're telling me it was. I don't bear any grudge. I'm grateful, truth to tell, for a new understanding of that old word Love. I want her, though. Who wouldn't want a mistress in a million? And as for Madeleine, she's the one to blame for all of this.

The appalling complexity of his problems, of his married wreckage, had just broken into Digby when he heard Fiona speak again.

"And the two clans will be united, Hamish," she was saying. "I don't mind. These daft quarrels are just daft. The Kilburnies and the Tarrs have patched it up forever. From now on they'll be joined by love."

"You bet they will," said Hamish. He laughed in reversal to his normal manner. Then he looked at Madeleine and Digby, shook his head several times, said: "Oh, my God!" and actually looked embarrassed. "I'm sorry for such an exhibition, Digby old boy," he mumbled. "But I've wanted this beautiful beast for so long—as I told you, didn't I?—that my well-known self-control is temporarily out of kilter."

He stood up and moved a little distance from Fiona. She edged after him. There was no doubt that it had hit Fiona like a cyclone. "I've never been in love before," she muttered. "Not just as if I was blind or something."

"Now now, Fiona," he said firmly and fondly. "Behave yourself."

"Yes, Hamish," she said, utterly his humble slave. What an amazing metamorphosis.

"I must be getting back," said Digby. He wanted to get back right away out of this mad situation. Anything would be better, even listening all night to the Colonel's stories. And Madeleine? What the hell now? It was all her fault for coming to this country. "I believe you have the Cadillac," he said coldly. She had taken it away that morning without so much as telling him, and he had had to get Dougald the sly factotum to drive him to the Birks.

"It's back of the house," she said, nodding at Balgersho's pre-fab. They walked side by side in prickling hostility, but no alternative.

It stood out a mile that Hamish and Fiona had eyes, ears, etcetera only for one another at this point of time.

"I say, old boy," called Hamish. "Do you mind if we hop a lift as far as the Birks? I have a small matter to attend to, and no gas left in my bloody kite."

They reached the car. Seating was not a problem. He drove away and down beside the merry Bal. The afternoon was falling into evening. His knuckles were still bleeding. He turned carefully on to the Junction bridge. Then they were fairly into the Bloody Gorge, and residual whiffs came on the breeze. He kept his eyes away from the rear-view mirror. There were limits to a man's forbearance, a man's capacity for cuckoldry even of this peculiar nature.

"It's away," cried Fiona from behind. "The blood's clean washed away. I can feel it in my bones."

Indeed the Gorge, for all the stench that hung about, did seem to wear a kindly air, or perhaps it was just a benefaction of evening sun on rocks. But no raven circled remotely overhead, no black scoundrel.

"All washed away except from Digby's knuckles," said Balgersho. "Now, no more fancy feelings in your bones, my Poppet. Just be yourself. Hold noses, everyone."

They held noses at the worst part where empty cartons lay spaced along the road; and now they had left the gorge, and the sombre Kil became the lively Kil of loud shallows, quiet pools and sparkling water.

As they passed the place where tradition held that the other Fiona and her Prissitulchan had dallied in love and innocence before the charge, Digby was reminded of his poem. He was a bit ashamed of everything, of this darned kilt and all the rest. But he was proud of the poem. He knew it was good. It had taught him something new about himself, yet another thing—sprung from the roots of melancholy, fostered in glen and on the hill, bloomed overnight. Oh, it was wonderful to create, to drive the burden from his system. And here was another thought—perhaps the poem drove Fiona out of his system too. But he would write no more, and he would certainly not show the thing to Madeleine, not even if they were reconciled to drab matrimony which was unlikely. She would just sneer with

intellectual snobbery, and say: *Dear Digby, writing little verses.* She stirred now suddenly on the seat beside him.

He turned into the Birks. A few clansmen trudged their way along the mile. They waved when they saw Fiona, but not with marked enthusiasm. The climax of the mid-century had been fiasco —they could not know that it had been triumph too; and their chieftain was certainly in no mood to tell them. She was not being a mother to her clan this evening.

"It's too bad we'll be as poor as kirk mouses, Hamie," mused Fiona. "I did so want to do up the Birks."

"Hamish," said Hamish. "Church mice. Don't forget. I agree it's a pity about the cash though, even if we still could rent, or start a hydro with a little capital, or sell it to the Government as a miners' rest-home, or to someone else."

"Sell which?"

"The Birks, my love. We're going to live in my aluminium mansion. Any objections?"

"I'll do what you say Hamish darling only I'll have to give some time just a little to the Clan."

"A modicum. Okay. But your wifely duty comes first. Never mind though. Love will out, won't it, Digby?"

"You bet," said Digby, feeling witty and tough. He had knocked this guy cold quite lately. "Love will surely find a way, and you got what's coming to you. Don't say I didn't warn you both."

Madeleine actually laughed as he drew up at the deserted house; it was all much the same as usual except for paper lying around and tables standing on the grass.

"I'm going to change now, if I may, Fiona." He hurried upstairs, got out of his kilt in double time, and put on the tweed suit which was draped on a chair beside Fiona's immemorial bed. He felt uncomfortable in there. Guilt and nostalgia tingled in his spine. He had just finished dressing when Fiona herself arrived.

Her lips were trembling, her eyes moist. He had seen a new docile Fiona this last hour, but happy—never a sign of tears.

"What's wrong, Fiona?"

She gulped. "Hamie, I mean Hamish says I'm to burn the dolls." She looked at Digby, the picture of dejection.

" Hamish is right," he said. " Of course, I'm prejudiced. I never did like those little gargoyles." He glanced at them with some distaste.

" I like them terribly," she said. " They were my wee highland men. Well, if he says so, I'll just have to do it." She went round to the bedside table and took them one by one into the cradle of her left arm against her sad bosom, giving to each a fond last hug— " Colin," she sighed. " Donald, Sheepy, Fergus, Geordie, Douglas, Torquil, and Neil's the last one, well . . ."

" There's a good girl," said Digby. She was a naughty girl, but she was good too.

" Thank you for everything," Fiona said and stared at him. She was not sad now, pensive rather. " I do like you very much Digby. Love's so funny Digby it's funny that the moment you avenged us I knew I loved him. It was a new feeling. Can you understand love Digby? "

" No," he said. " Yes I can. To tell you the truth I guess I can understand anything from now on. It's a strange bloody world as the Colonel said yesterday. And here's another thing—suppose I'd let you shoot Hamish on McKercher. What about that? "

" I wouldn't have *killed* him; a flesh wound would have done. I'm a crack shot and I'll tell you something Digby you're much the nicest man I've ever known."

Who wants to be nice? " Come on," he said firmly. " No afterthoughts. Downstairs you go."

She went downstairs, and he followed, thinking another screwy thought: that he had the whiphand of her now it was platonic.

Hamish had laid a small fire of sticks and paper on the gravel. " Here goes," he said, and put a match to it, and strutted like a victorious rooster. " Burn them up, Fiona." Madeleine watched from the car.

Fiona was no longer sad, no longer even pensive. She giggled for the second time in Digby's short yet manifold experience. " Colin," she giggled, throwing him on the flames, and " Donald," and so on down the list till every manikin had flamed and been consumed. It was a pity, really; they were works of art. " There! " she giggled out of character. " All gone."

" Is that the lot? " rapped Hamish. " Any more in the making? "

She gave him a startled look, then blushed. She blushed all over, all down beneath the blouse; you felt there couldn't be anywhere she wasn't blushing. " I'll see," she said, went to the corner of the tower, and shouted: " Nanny! Where the hell are you, Nanny? "

" Tut-tut now, dearie. What's got intae ye? "

" Got'nydollsupyonder? "

" I've just the one. It's no finished for my bebby yet."

" Throw it down."

There were indignant mutterings from above; but in a moment the doll came tumbling down the ancient wall. Fiona caught it deftly, and returned. She was demure, not a likely thing for her to be.

Digby shot a glance at impassive Madeleine, at leering Hamish, at the embers of the bonfire. He had an idea that this was the kind of moment when a man in his position mightn't rightly know just where to look.

But Fiona was speaking. " It was to be my special favourite," she sighed, turning the thing over in her hand. It was complete from toes to waist, wearing the green and gold and scarlet of Kilburnie—of Prissitulchan too—the sporran made of leather, the shoes black, the knees brown, the hose a hunter's green. It lacked only bonnet, collar, tie and jacket.

" Come on," said her new lord and master. " Pop the little fellow in."

Fiona gave a last giggle. Then the flames sprang up.

It was high time to leave. " Good luck, my children! " Digby said. " There's just one thing, Hamish—a small matter of fifteen pounds. I want it now, please."

For the second time that evening, Hamish was out of countenance. " My dear old boy," he almost stammered. " My dear old boy, I'm clean out. I can get it by to-morrow. Would that do? "

" No," said Digby. " Now."

" Fiona, my love, got any cash? "

She shook her head. Money was far from her thoughts.

" Try Nanny, then." Fiona bounded obediently upstairs.

" Can I have a word with you, Digby? "

" Why, sure," He moved off with Hamish.

" Look, old boy, now that I've hooked this woman finally, I don't want to let the grass grow under my feet. And the thing is I do have a good many pals of this kind or that, mostly that, not very steady characters on the whole, apt to put squibs in the clergyman's cassock. Well, I've had an idea, but what with one thing and another I hardly like to ask you . . ." Lord Balgersho seemed embarrassed.

" Ask away."

" The point is do you think you could stand the thought of being my best man? It's a sort of impertinent question to ask a chap of such sterling virtue, but I do wish you would. I know what would happen if I got old Pranger Potter."

" But I'm going next week." Best man? He did like the guy, though, didn't he unaccountably?

" We can have the bloody wedding next week. Any time you say. Please, old boy."

" Well, okay," said Digby. " Thank you. It's a great compliment."

" Splendid! " Hamish slapped him on the back. " One other thing," he went on *sotto voce*, " and none of my business, but I couldn't help noticing a certain coolness between you and Madeleine. I just want to tell you that I think she's the most gutful attractive girl I've ever met. You should have seen her in the plane to-day, feeling as sick as hell too. And if it wasn't for my inexplicable passion for old Queenie . . ."

" Thanks," said Digby. " Well, we must get going."

Fiona brought the fifteen pounds. She said quite loudly: " You'll always be my hero, Digby."

He got into the car and turned to look at this supremely handsome couple. " Congratulations," said Madeleine. She smiled very nicely at them.

Digby swung round the gravel. Hamish and Fiona vanished into the East Tower.

" Hamish asked me to be his best man," he said for something to say, and because of that corny little thing which rests in most of us.

" He did, did he? " said Madeleine. " And you'll always be that woman's hero too. Always wonderful Digby. Always the biggest most conceited hypocrite in the world. Always the perfect little man."

" I'm sorry, Madeleine," he said. Yes, he was very sorry in some

ways. " Hamish just told me you were the most gutful attractive girl he'd ever met."

Madeleine wept. He had heard her cry often enough before, but never like this. She sobbed wildly and did not put a hand or a handkerchief up to her face. She gave herself over to weeping while he drove slower and slower.

" Oh, Madeleine," he said. He couldn't stand it. He put his hand on hers. Poor Madeleine. Yes, he had been a billy-goat, wooing another woman before her eyes.

" Stop it," she sobbed, pushing his hand away.

" What's wrong? " he asked. That hopeless helpless feeling.

" What's wrong? " She turned on the seat, eyes swollen, cheeks wet and blotched. It was damnably touching. " What's wrong is, that I meet the one really attractive man in all my life, and you have to go and have a crazy fight and spoil everything and let her get her hooks in before I can do more than kiss him."

" Madeleine? Really, Madeleine! " He was profoundly shocked. It was downright immoral to talk that way.

She stopped crying, wiped her face, and shook with occasional after-spasms as they drove down and over McIntoon bridge and past the village and up to Glendrogan. " Really, Madeleine! " she mimicked. " There goes Prissy Ross again."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

He dropped his wife at the front door. "Thank you so much," she said.

There goes Prissy Ross to park his Cadillac under the copper beech. "Digby P.!" It was the Colonel admiring gentians. He did not want the affliction of Galbraith. He wanted to curl up in some corner and be low in spirit by himself. But the man could not be denied.

"Well, young feller, how did you get on? What in Heaven's name was that crocodile procession? What did you think of my Hitler salute? How come the contusions on your handsome face? How come the sanguinary fist?"

Digby gave a résumé, expurgated.

"So you knocked him out, eh? Wonderful, marvellous, you're a doughty old warrior, Digby P. Then I suppose Fiona took a knife to the rascal, or spat on him at the very least."

"No," said Digby cattily. "She jumped on him. They're engaged to be married. The wedding's next week, in fact."

This information knocked the Colonel on his beam-ends. He blanched and all the looping veins stood out; he mouthed words and could not say them. Finally he sat down on a rockery rock and put head in hands. "How awful," he groaned. "Oh sacred Krishna, how appalling! Are you sure?"

"Certain. Why so distressed, Colonel? They're what you might call natural mates."

"Unnatural. Think of the progeny. Think of the spawn they'll throw up. Think of the crookery and trickery and stupidity. Oh, this is a grievous blow, my boy. I did so hope we might get new

blood in these parts. I had my pipe dreams. I made my little plots and plans about a general post. Well, it serves me right for being an idealist in a wicked world."

"*A general post?*"

"Yes, I confess it, Digby. I thought that Madeleine and you might make a man and woman of them."

"Really, Colonel!" There Prissy went again. But was it prissy to feel this was a bit too much? And did the old fool think that he, *an American*, would settle down in Scotland?

"No offence intended, Digby P., in fact a compliment to you both, particularly to your charming wife, a girl in a million I would say. Well, what must be must be, but I'm disappointed and I don't deny it. Still, there's no good kicking against the pricks, as my dear Mona used to tell me when I was impatient in my younger days. Nowadays I'm not one whit impatient, but I *am* a frightful scoundrel. So is everyone except that sanctimonious old prig, MacLean. He's a good man I admit."

"Lachlan McLean's a splendid fellow," Digby interrupted. "The best type of younger clergyman, I would say."

"You would say, would you? Interesting, Digby P., very interesting to hear the views of such a distinguished wise-guy as yourself." The Colonel's coat had changed all of a sudden. "If I may venture a wretched opinion of my own, it is that this milk-sop priest is a pain in the veritable neck. By the way, he has asked for an interview this evening at six of all hours. What's the time?"

"It's ten of six."

"How d'you mean *ten of six*? Time can be to or past but never of except the witching hour. Time is not Catherine of Anjou."

"Be careful, Colonel."

The Colonel cowered away. "Please don't hit me, Digby P. I didn't make any jokes about your nose."

So the old obesity had been in that one too.

"I wonder what this Minister is after. It could be the usual charitable spiel. Bad enough. But I have a far worse suspicion."

"What?"

"That he's going to ask for Elspeth's lovely hand. In which case

I'll give him a scare he won't forget. I'll warn him off the course for good and all."

"Why, Colonel?"

"First because she is needed in this house. Life's not all a bed of roses in the East Tower, not for us humdrum worker-bees. Second, I don't like the earnest creature. He offends me."

"It wouldn't be you he'd want to marry," Digby said moderately. But he was not pleased at that East Tower crack, and he attacked: "If you're too selfish to allow Elspeth to lead her own life you deserve to be strung up."

The Colonel looked coldly at him. "That's an impertinence," he said, then wavered and weakened. "I've got to have a cook," he pleaded. "And Bridget Moloney shows restive signs already. She said this morning, *Colonel dear*, she said. *The kitchen's an old poke of a place, not what I'm used to.* The thin end of the wedge. The next thing she'll say is it's lonely in the country and that's only one step to stepping on the bus. But I'm a lonely old chap, Digby P. I have to have someone to see to the house, and Elspeth's better than nothing. It's not much to ask when I brought her up."

"It's far too much to ask if she does want to marry. Cousin Mona was the only daughter of a widower. He wasn't that selfish."

"Quite different. Mona's poppa had no roots. He was a typical Yankee flitting from pub to hotel, from flatlet to penthouse, from Colosseum to leaning tower of Pisa. No, I'm sorry, Digby P. You take a touchingly sedulous interest in my affairs, but nothing doing. Ah, here he comes. Well, live and let live is one of my many mottoes, so I hope it's only about the Scouts." The Colonel seemed firm in his mean resolve.

The young Minister was stooped over handlebars, peddling fast uphill. He looked like a man spurred on by a purpose more consuming than Boy Scouts.

Digby had kept back the strong card. "Colonel," he said very carefully. "If Cousin Mona knew those were your views, I don't think she would ever forgive you."

That dirty punch struck home. It hit the Colonel right where belly bulged above sporran. He plucked at absurd moustache, one side then the other, pulled bulbous nose, put hand to brow. "Oh,

my God," he groaned. "I never thought of that one, Digby P. I do believe you're right."

Lachlan McLean propped his bicycle and came over, hat in hand. He was wild-eyed, trickles of sweat running down each cheek, over pulsating jawbones down scraggy neck into clerical collar.

"Good evening, Colonel Galbraith. Good evening, Mr. Ross," bobbing a bow to each of them.

"Hallo Padre," said the Colonel. "How many souls have you saved to-day?"

The young man winced at this Galbraithiana, stared down at his large black boots. He was in an emotional simmer, no question of it. He was all brewed up.

Digby had done his best in Lachlan's cause. If this was the fateful interview, it was not for him. "I think I'll go take a bath," he said. "Be seeing you, Lachlan."

"Don't leave us, I beg of you, Digby P."

"Oh, please stay, Mr. Ross."

Both gazed at him anxiously. It was awkward.

"Well, Padre," said the Colonel. "Is it extortion again in a holy cause? Or have the Scouts been getting the Guides in trouble?"

Lachlan gave a jump, flushed, opened his mouth to speak, closed it. His eyes flickered all over the place.

The dirty old so and so. Digby caught Lachlan's eye and frowned. *Do what I told you*, he willed at him: *Be tough!*

The Minister drew breath and exploded in a hollow charge of indignation: "I very much object to that remark, Colonel Galbraith. I suppose you say such things just to be clever and make fun of the finest youth movements in the world. And you're always making daft jokes like *How many souls have I saved to-day*. Well, if you want to know I haven't saved any, and I know one soul that isn't worth saving, and that's yours Colonel Galbraith. You're a thorn in my flesh is the truth, and I'm fair fed up, God forgive me." The Minister had gone into battle with a beginner's fury. He boomed as from the Presbyterian pulpit. It was impressive.

"Well, I mean to say, young feller, you can't speak to me like that you know, but perhaps I shouldn't have said it. Yes, it was a

tactless joke. Quite the Church militant, aren't you, what? Quite the firebrand priest and pr . . .? "

Lachlan brushed this aside with a large hand. He stooped to stare into the Colonel's piggy eyes; they shifted. " I've not come about the Scouts or the Guides or the Jumble Sale, Colonel Galbraith," he hissed. " I've come to ask for Miss Elspeth's hand in marriage if she'll have me."

The Colonel made one of his lightning rallies. " Indeed, sir? Pray tell me, have you reason to believe that my daughter is enamoured of you? Have you made advances to her? "

" No, Colonel Galbraith, and I don't know at all what she thinks about me: and it wouldn't be easy to find out considering the sarcastic remarks you're aye making whenever I'm near Miss Elspeth. You're a mocker of everything decent including love, Colonel Galbraith." Lachlan seemed to have taken Digby's advice too literally.

" Ah, Love," sighed the Colonel, not offended. " Them's harsh words, m'boy, considering my pre-occupation with the subject. Whatever my faults I never mock love. *Farquhar*, my dear wife used to say before she lost her accent, *You've gotten amoor right on the brain*, and so I did have in the days of long ago when I was an honourable young chap like you, Padre." He cleared his throat and said severely: " But man cannot live on love alone. How shall I express the matter delicately? What dough or dibs or onions . . .? No, that won't do. That's all right for the great Runyon, but not for Thorn-in-the-Flesh Galbraith. As a doting father it is my duty to ask: Could you support my daughter in the manner to which she is accustomed? "

" No, Colonel Galbraith. I've nothing but my stipend."

" And I fancy you'd expect a handsome little dowry from the despised father."

" I would not," said McLean vehemently. " I love Miss Elspeth for herself. I wouldn't let her bring a penny."

" But my dear boy," pleaded the chameleon Colonel. " That wouldn't be fair at all. Here she is, my one and only family possession. Surely you wouldn't begrudge a small allowance. Please now! "

" No, Colonel Galbraith. Not a penny."

" Do persuade him, Digby P."

Digby had been amused and embarrassed by these proceedings.

" You'll have to agree, Lachlan. It's a father's right to make provision for his daughter."

The Reverend Lachlan McLean shook his anxious head. " I couldn't touch it," he said. " Not but that what Miss Elspeth had for herself would be my business. I mean it wouldn't be, not if she wanted to buy hats and the things that ladies fancy. But the like of the housekeeping and every other expense would be mine alone. I have a strong pride and that's a sin I know, but I'm sure I'm right in this, don't you agree, Mr. Ross? " Lachlan was calmer. He looked at Digby with trust and devotion.

" In principle certainly." Digby said. " But you have to make concessions. No strings attached, no favours from Daddy is the important thing, eh Colonel? "

" Hmmm," gruffed Galbraith.

" Here's me speaking as if I had my chickens counted," Lachlan said with a nervous gulp. " But caution ne'er stormed a fortress in life's battle, as Mr. Ross said one day at the river. I do wish Mr. Ross lived with us always, Colonel Galbraith. He's such a wise and healthy influence in the Glen."

" He is a potent influence," said the Colonel, darting a beady glance at Digby. " I adore him. Perhaps the thing I love best is the way he longs to keep me in the straight and narrow."

The Minister drew himself up to his spindly height. " Sir," he said, " may I pay my formal addresses to Miss Elspeth? "

There was a long pause while the Colonel stared across the Glen. Clouds were building. " Y'know," he said. " It only seems yesterday the winter I met Mona at Delhi. She and her father who was a frightful old bore with a positive lust for seeing the sights in a white topi but not a bad chap really, they were globe trotting all round the damned country and I got some leave and became an appendage. We saw the Red Fort, and . . . . . .

" It was the grand and only passion of my life, and it was some passion I can tell you young fellers. But no encouragement, no response whatsoever; she was more interested in ruins. Well, my leave was up, and I was getting pretty desperate. The last place was the Quutab, which is an enormous tower thing in memory of some old Mogul. *We simply must do that*, I said, knowing full well that the

old man wasn't up to climbing. So Mona and I did it alone. *This is a mighty tall order, Farquhar*, I remember her voice booming down to me after a couple of hundred steps, but she had wonderful guts and single-mindedness like all American women. Personally I hardly noticed the climb because I was beside myself wondering how I could get to grips with the girl.

Well, Mona elected to take a breather at the last level-place before the top, and just as I was going to join her she let out a piercing shriek and fell back into my arms. She was quite a load for a chap my size to take on a circular staircase, *Farquhar!* she cried. *Scorpion!* And there it was, would you believe it, God knows how it came to be miles up like that. My chance, and boys, did I take it! I pushed her behind me, then I offered the cane-thing I was carrying to Mr. Scorpion, or Mrs. Scorpion actually because the biggest and baddest and blackest are said to be the females. She gripped with claws and she struck smack with sting. I flipped her over the railing and she sailed away down to earth. I always hope she didn't come to any harm, being my love's motivation in a manner of speaking. *Oh, Farquhar, you're wonderful*, Mona said. So that was the first kiss I ever gave my dear Mona, nearly at the top of the Quutab in an ancient Delhi. We reached the summit just as the sun was setting and the light turned violet and we kissed and hugged and never looked back. Mona's poppa was getting very impatient for his highball by the time we groped our way down to terra firma in the darkness.

"Oh hell's bells," wept the Colonel. "'Go to it, boy, and don't thank me, thank this interfering busybody, Ross."

"Thank you, Colonel Galbraith. Och, thanks." Lachlan pumped his hand, and strode towards the front door. Digby went too. "I never knew he had such a good sad side to him. It just shows you shouldn't judge people. I wonder where Miss Elspeth is?"

"I'll see if I can find her. Do quit saying Miss Elspeth. Don't be so humble, Lachlan."

"Oh, dear," said the Minister. "I don't have the moral fibre. Could you be there to help me?"

"No," Digby said firmly. "I'll tell her why you've come. More than that I will not do."

He went upstairs and on to the landing where the Colonel's bedroom door was open, and Madeleine's door, which he had never been through, was shut, and Elspeth's door was shut also. He knocked.

She was sitting at the open window, finishing the red sweater. Oh my God, what a plain girl. "'Lo," she said, as clipped as ever. "Gathering a success?"

"I guess so," Digby said. "It was a parcel of surprises." And he deliberately broke the news of Hamish and Fiona.

Her fingers ceased to fly. She stared at Digby, gave him that full basilisk attention which he had once seen her bestow on Lachlan. "I knew it would happen," she said. "And it's all your fault for being mutton dressed as lamb. I loathe Hamish Balgersho. He stinks the worst of all her men."

"Fiona has to get married some time. I really do think she loves him. I saw her find it out."

Elspeth shrugged. She had an expressive shrug of muscular shoulders. "Hmmm," she said, eloquence over.

"Lachlan McLean is here to see you."

"What about?"

"He wants you to marry him."

Elspeth blushed. It was not a beautiful blush, as Fiona through the blouse, or Madeleine the other night, but it did give warmth. It suddenly brought life to her plainness. "That fool!" she said.

"He asked and got your father's permission, and now he's pacing the smoking-room. You'll have to go down and tell him yes or no."

"He cut me dead in the village yesterday," she rambled thoughtfully. "So why does he come to-night? Lachlan is *so* good and serious and thinking about sin that I'll jolly well say No. I'm not keen on him either, except that sometimes he makes me feel funny."

"He doesn't love you because you can cook or knit sweaters or be useful. He loves you honestly for yourself, Elspeth. It isn't only loving, it's being loved." And who am I, pray who am I to talk this way?

"It *is* nice to be liked," mused Elspeth, "and Lachlan's the only person who ever did like me for me and not for wanting something. Besides, it would be wonderful to get away from Father. He's a most ungrateful little beast."

Digby looked out over towards the East Tower where there would be merry goings-on. He was offended by the way she spoke:

" Suppose I'd better accept," said Elspeth quite softly, and she went over to her dressing table with its wooden brushes and its bottle of Yardley's. She attacked her hair; put some lavender on; then tugged at her dress. " Look all right? "

" You look much the nicest I've ever seen you," Digby said. She did. She had a wanted glow, even a sparkle if you could believe it.

" Get it over with." Elspeth marched down to love.

Digby followed. He had to go that way to reach the North Wing, and he was in a hurry to be out of earshot. He did not wish to hear the Minister's sincere avowals. But he heard the beginning —Lachlan's prophetic pulpit boom as he said: " Miss Elspeth! " Then the tone changed, cracked into a human unclerical falsetto: " Elspeth! "

Well, that's that, Digby thought as he crossed the hall en route to the North Wing. I hope I was right. I hope she doesn't make his life a hell and nag the poor guy and drive him to drink or worse. *Interfering busybody*, true.

But a loud and melodious peal of laughter sounded. It had that unmistakable timbre of a happy chase around the kitchen. He could not forbear to glance in. Dougald the sly factotum and Bridget Moloney the cook were having a friendly wrestle, the big woman making two widths of the thin man, and she cried: " Be aisy now, Dougald. Be still for me to kiss you before being after cooking dinner." Which she did, taking him into the bare haven of her arms.

Digby hurried on. " I'm needin' air," was the last thing he heard, and that from Dougald.

What's this? he thought later in his bath. What is it about this crazy place? That woman's fifty-five well fifty if she's a day, and Dougald you wouldn't think he had it in him. Then Lachlan and Elspeth, Hamish and Fiona, and me and Fiona, and Madeleine and Hamish. What more combinations, for God's sake?

It was disgusting the way Madeleine spoke about me spoiling her chances with that guy. It was just plain indecent. And what about me? It's different for a man. Oh, my golly some girl, Fiona, and

all over now and I don't care much. I know what I'll do. I'll say to Madeleine after dinner, I'll say: *Madeleine, I'd like you to fly home right away. We might try to make a go of it again later if that's your wish. I shall be at your disposal after the wedding.*

That's the honourable course of action for her own sake. Besides, if she stayed here she'd be sure to do something haywire like making another pass at Hamish. I wouldn't put it past her in this crazy state. *You dumb stuffed-shirt*, she dared to call me.

He pulled at the plug chain with his big toe and lay till the water had gurgled out. He was stiff and sore and jealous. Everyone had love but him. He would go make a date with old MacLagan, the only sane guy in this parish, and to-morrow—no, that was Sunday—Monday they would shoot or stalk or fish all day, far, just as far as possible from woman, and the ugliest one said he was mutton dressed as lamb.

Digby and MacLagan were on the river early. He killed a ten-pound salmon in the Bannock, and he said to MacLagan, the old notion striking him again: "Would you mind if we tried for a grouse and a stag to make the three? I read about it before I came, and it seems to be a mild fixation with me. I guess we Americans are full of ambitions like that."

"I'll do whatever Mr. Ross fancies," said MacLagan. "I'd like fine for Mr. Ross to have good memories of Scotland. But there's nothing American about it. His Lordship aye has such ambitions, as I was saying. Come away then, Mr. Ross." He seemed quite enthusiastic.

They drove up the hill road, stopping to shoot not one grouse but a brace. They left the Land-Rover at the loch where Digby had lunched on the twelfth of August, and they were far away from women, but it was not possible for him now to walk through heather without being aware of one woman. She was the has-been; she had passed beyond his ken. Fiona had gotten him into more mischief in whatever number of days it was than he had found in all the rest of his life. She was indeed dumb, a shade unscrupulous, the child of wayward passions, but she had brought him closer to the earth.

Behind them to the South, grey rain-clouds rolled over the glen.

"This is the real Highland weather," MacLagan said. "I doubt we're to get a soak."

Much later Digby shot his red deer, not one stag but two, both ten-pointers.

Fire, reload, switch, aim and fire before the shocked second stag could flee. It fell too. Oh why did I kill these wild free things? Why? Because I am man, the hunter. Or should I be a vegetarian?

"I couldn't have done better masel." MacLagan said. It was his highest praise.

The loch was grey, ripples of wind slanting across, the Land-Rover standing beside the boathouse, a square car alone in this world of mist and hill and water. They walked in an enclave between swirling cloud.

"I'd like fine to die here on the hill," MacLagan said, "when my time comes. No down yonder in my bed."

"I suppose you're a happy man."

"Happy? Man, I'm content. Four bairns left out o' the six, and all married, and ten grandchildren, an' the wife and me past the time for quarrels, and the worrk. What's happiness?"

"I don't know," Digby said.

"Were you ever blessed wi' bairns, Mr. Ross?"

"No," he said. "Worse luck."

"Mr. Ross would make a good enough father, mebbe a wee thing soft in the hand." MacLagan looked at his own leathery blood-stained, criss-crossed palm. "My laddies felt this, I'm tellin' ye."

What an old prig, knowing all the answers, much like Jake Doon in a different way. Is our only solution to be found in the simple life? No, it can't be so. It's just easier for them. How would he and Jake get on? They wouldn't. Too damned wise and dogmatic. Or perhaps they would. You never know what'll be what or what not.

They drove down in the mist. Small drops stood out on MacLagan's beard.

"I hear tell His Lordship's getting married into Miss Fiona."

The candour of these expressions. "Yes," said Digby. "They'll make a fine couple."

"I'm no saying but what they might or they mightn't. And

another thing I hear tell was that Mr. Ross knocked His Lordship out with a beauty. Mebbe it'll do His Lordship good. Mr. Ross has the qualities of a chentleman."

"Thank you," said Digby. Is there anything this old devil doesn't hear tell?

Down through the quiet drizzle, and now below cloud into heavier rain. "MacLagan, any chance of another salmon?"

"I was giving that question consideration. From the look it's been raining heavy—five hours, and the heaviest up at the source of the Kil. It'll be high, and it'll be dirrty. We could try for the small chance there is. Mind you, I'm pessimistic."

"Do we use a fly?"

"Hmmm," said MacLagan. God, he could be annoying, this man of virtue.

So it came about that Digby stood at the Piper's pool—where he had lost a fish between MacLagan and the Colonel on his first evening. To-day the Piper's was very different—the water brown, streaked with the lather of flood, quiet and ugly. Rain laid its hissing pock-marks on the surface. Rain trickled down Digby's neck. He held a very long rod. From the leader dangled not a fly or a spoon, but a great bunch of worms—*Brandlings*, MacLagan called them with a sort of pride as he dipped into his mossy tin and impaled the poor red creatures one by one on triple hooks until it seemed that a hundred worm-tails wriggled in a captive mass.

"If salmon don't eat in fresh water, why worms?" asked Digby. He was impatient.

"It's the provocation is my considered opinion," MacLagan answered. "But I'm holding out no hope the nicht. Now what Mr. Ross has to do is swing the worrms out in the manner of a pendulum, and dibble-dabble up and down in such a way as will provoke a fish sheltering below yon sunken rock, which is unlikely."

Digby dibble-dabbled for practice close to shore; then he dibble-dabbled in midstream, which was far more difficult, and the lively bunch of worms bobbed in and out of the water until they scuttered a furrow at the limit of the line. He dibble-dabbled many times past that rock in the drenching rain while a peewit called, wheeling

beyond the bank. It was no good; no salmon moved. There were no salmon.

" Hoapeless," said MacLagan. He was evidently fed up.

" I'll just try one farther out," Digby said.

" Man, there's no chance. There's no rocks. A fish couldn't lie yonder in spate."

" Trying all the same." This Moses, this Highland Solomon could be wrong, couldn't he?

Digby pendulumed his tired worms right out and across upstream. It was too far to dibble-dabble. He let them hurry down just below the surface in a last foolish attempt, and the line looped round after them, and in a moment they would break surface and he would reel in and go home. He put his hand to the reel.

" Leave it! " screamed MacLagan.

It took an hour to bring that eccentric law-defying fish to gaff, an hour and many runs down to the backing and one perilous climb along slippery rocks to the next pool. But he was done at last. " Up a wee bit," said MacLagan on his belly, peering over. " More. Steady! " Then he made that deft wicked stroke with the gaff, and the salmon was out, quivering on the bank. Oh, what a fish! Oh, unbelievable!

Digby let the rod drop. He was tired out, arms, legs, stomach, head buzzing, panting. He sat down, but the cries of MacLagan drew attention. " Thirrty pound," he shouted, dancing about with arms spread high, looking more than ever like a Biblical prophet, a Biblical prophet gone berserk. " A cockfish with the lice on him. Man, Digby, yon was braw. Man, ye did well. I kenned fine the wurrms was the only hope. Man, I'm right glad I made ye persist in it." He thumped Digby on the shoulders. He was beside himself with delight and self-satisfaction. There was no doubt whose idea that last far dibble-dabble was going to be.

It was wetter than ever and very murky. They climbed from the sibilance of rain on flood to the spatter of rain on leaves. There had always been rain. " Home," said Digby, although it was not home for him. He was pleased. He had done what he set out to do, a thing that few people ever did succeed in doing. He was not so pleased as he should have been.

" Mr. Ross is a fisher," said MacLagan in the quiet aftermath of exuberance. " Mr. Ross does credit."

" Thank you, MacLagan. I'm very grateful for all you've done."

" I hear tell Mr. Ross made a braw speech like a poem at the Gathering, and wearing the kilt an' all. I'm thinking Mr. Ross could pass for a Highlander in appearance and behaviour."

" Do you think so, MacLagan? " Intended as a compliment, flattering.

" I do that, and the voice could be put right with practice."

You arrogant old something. Oh well, never mind; it's the cross we have to bear. It's the same as that nice stewardess, Maggie Aitken in the plane. It's the same as St. Andrew's night in Timbuctoo. It's the same as the young English Lord in Washington I heard about who said he was amazed at the goodness of American women's legs considering they all came of peasant stock. It ought to be a joke.

" . . . We've had American lairds afore. There was a Mr. Morgan, a rich gentleman too seemingly, used to come every season for the grouse. He was well enough thought of."

" Mr. Morgan could have put me a hundred times in his pocket and not noticed it," said Digby with asperity. What was this about American lairds?

" Mr. Ross'll be back, I'm hoping." MacLagan said, and was silent for the rest of the way.

But Digby's thoughts were off in another direction. *Wouldn't it be a good idea, Madeleine,* drawing her aside according to plan after dinner last night. *Wouldn't it be a good idea if you took a plane back in the next day or two? It's awkward here, isn't it, Madeleine, with things as they are between us. What do you think?* Very conciliatory, but she just laughed in my face. *Go home yourself, Hot Shot!* I don't know what's come over her. Well, I suppose it's the infatuation for Hamish. Women are a mystery to me. You look after them all the long years, then they turn on you, and use sneering expressions like *Hot Shot.*

" Colonel! " Digby called from the porch. God, he was wet. " Are you there, Colonel? "

" Is that you, Digby P.? Where the hell have you been? I was just going to call out the constabulary." The Colonel hustled into

the hall, whisky in hand. Elspeth trailed after him and Madeleine too, standing in the background.

MacLagan stepped forward, a salmon hanging from each hand, a small one and a large one. " Mr. Ross did the double hat trick," he said with unexpected pride. " What does the Laird think of that? "

" Think of it? I don't know what you mean. Did he pepper you twice in the sombrero? "

MacLagan explained. He might have been dreaming of double hat-tricks all his life. " And the big fush," he finished up. " It was a chance in a million even with the worrms and I says to Mr. Ross, we'll just try the once more. . . . Mr. Ross did fine."

" Congratulations, Digby P. Some dead-eyed Dick, some Nimrod, eh? If it goes on like this, you'll clean me out of flesh, fowl and good pink salmon. Well done, Yankee Doodle, do or die."

" What I could do with is a drink," said Digby, off whose back these Galbraithian witticisms coursed much more duck-like than the rain. " What about a dram for you, MacLagan? "

" I never touched a drap in my life," said MacLagan. " And I'm no needing the false heat of it the now. Thanks just the same, Mr. Ross." He squelched teetotally off to clean his fish in Bridget Moloney's kitchen.

Elspeth brought a big tot. He swigged it down while his wetness dripped on to the scrubbed stone floor. The whisky's heat might be false but it pumped through him at once. The Colonel and Elspeth went back to the smoking-room: Madeleine stayed on there at the refectory table, fiddling with a pile of old visiting cards on a tray.

" It's been a wonderful day," said Digby, feeling good now, feeling it was easy, after all, to be friendly.

She smiled but not at him. " You must be terribly pleased," she said, meaning *with yourself.*

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

DIGBY LAY in his dark room in the North Wing. He had come early to bed because he was tired after a great day on the hill and by the river, and because the evening atmosphere at Glendrogan had more than ever been that compendium of malice and mockery and bad old corn which hung aura-like around the Colonel. Madeleine egged him on; Elspeth knitted a whole pair of socks with a new light in her eyes; Digby drank whisky to dispel the chills and to endure the persiflage. *You know, Digby P., you'll always be my hero from way back, my Daniel Boon in shining armour.*

At which Madeleine giggled in a crazy fashion and ran out to the hall. In a minute she was back with a daub of lipstick on the tip of her nose, the Colonel's Scotch hat on her head, a tartan rug around her middle. "Prissitulchan at my side!" she shouted, and marched up and down the room with her chest way out making dreadful bagpipe noises while Galbraith laughed himself into an admiring jelly. Digby winced and poured another. *Good night*, he said sourly at ten o'clock.

That was an hour ago. Since then the rain had stopped, a breeze grew to rattle the loose window, and it was a cool dark night for sleep. But Digby could not sleep.

I wish I was home, he thought. I wish I was back on the job. I wonder how I could have forgotten the exhilaration these last weeks in Scotland, never even gave a thought to the real pleasure of my life. It's power, of course. You could call it the joy of wielding power, not for the sake of power itself but for the sake of building well. I don't revel in power *qua* power. I'm not that kind of a guy. Or am I? Well, I wonder how they're getting on with the Wyoming Project . . .

Thus his thoughts galloped and flitted and flew. But however much he longed to be at grips once more with business problems which could be a sanctuary for him as for many men—the fact remained that his immediate world was here not there, that he had agreed to be best man at Fiona's wedding early next week, that meanwhile he had time and too much time to ponder other things.

Now, he thought judicially, take Madeleine. She puts on this intellectual dog. Or to be accurate, she used to put it on before she went crazy. She used to sneer at my poor brains. Example—when I said I didn't like her boy friend's title—*Picnic at Golgotha*—she smiled and said *Dear Digby*. That was her snooty line. That was always the sort of thing.

Well now in Scotland she's a different woman. I thought at first it was an act to get me back. She must have come for that. But she's really changed. I believe it's some primitive surging urge or urging surge back to the cave life. This hunting and kissing and dancing on the lawn and dumb remarks and risking her neck in planes and crying her heart out about Balgersho and calling me a poor old red-nosed sucker, and last night saying *Go home yourself, Hot Shot*, and then that outrageous episode this evening. Damned insulting, nursery humour. I'm only forty-one. I do the double hat-trick. I get wet all day and don't catch cold. I'm one helluva lover. I'm the great lover nobody loves.

No, I used to be irritated by her, and the last night in New York she provoked me beyond endurance. But why is it now since yesterday particularly that she makes me seethe? She makes one stupid corny remark and I have to turn my back so as not to offer violence. She used to bore me; now she maddens me. It's insufferable. We've got to have a showdown. Why shouldn't I go have it out with Madeleine?

What now in the middle of the night? Don't be crazy. But she won't speak to me in the day time; she never will. It's now or never. It's my duty to make one more effort, say to her: *Madeleine, you're making me most unhappy*, or say to her: *Madeleine I know my duty if you don't know yours. I'm ready to try again, if only for appearance's sake. We mustn't parade our differences before Galbraith.* Just a brief whispered talk and try to get her sympathy if she has any sanity left, and tiptoe back again, and nobody the wiser.

There was no moon, but the sky had cleared. He groped for his moccasin slippers. He put on his dressing-gown. He prowled along the corridor. He was a silent mover, a proved hunter, a credit to MacLagan. But what would MacLagan say? MacLagan would say: *Mr. Ross is not wise, I'm thinking.*

Downstairs and past the kitchen and swing the baize door an inch —no lights. Digby stood in the sepulchral hall, black but for a glimmer of polished table, of glassy stags' eyes on the walls. He heard the wind's rustle in the copper beech.

He was nervous. He was a fool to do this. I tell you what, he told himself. I'll go in the smoking-room and have a snort. That'll be an alibi if anyone's heard me, and it'll give time to change my mind, to think better of this crazy idea.

He did. He gave himself a large neat stealthy whisky without even a tinkle of glass.

Of course he was right. *Never brood,* Father used to say. *If you're angry with a man, go tell him.* Same with woman of course, man's other self.

Digby tiptoed up the side of the staircase, hardly any creaks. He stood on the landing. He heard sonorous snores from the Colonel's room, nothing from the others. He would slip in and whisper: *Madeleine, I must have a talk with you, just a few minutes. I've something to say to you, Madeleine.*

He turned the handle slowly, very slowly; it made no noise at all. He pushed. The door was locked. He released it carefully, and stalked back down the way he had come. *She locked it,* he thought, grim and angry. *She barred this one last road to understanding.*

Digby was a determined man at any time, a man spurred now by whisky and insomnia. He did not hesitate. He went past the kitchen, past Bridget Moloney's bedroom, unlocked the back door quietly, stepped into the cold night, and walked down the path by the North Wing. An owl hooted, the light rapacious bird of night.

He stood below Madeleine's open window. She was mad about fresh air—a hot-house flower and a fresh-air fiend, another contradiction. In the winters of their prosaic life together in New York he used to suffer from this mania. On the coldest nights he wore a

woollen beret in the cause of pampering his wife who loved fresh air at zero. Idiot thought to have now.

It was the easiest climb imaginable, a mere twenty feet or thereabouts. The stones of the wall at that corner were laid one jutting out six inches and the next one in, the kind of wall an active spinster of sixty might succeed in scaling. To Digby, in tip-top physical condition after a fortnight of mountain scrambles, the thing was child's play.

He did not pause to wonder whether it wasn't a pretty dreadful thing to burst in on his estranged wife through the window. He swarmed up, gripped the sash, swung his left leg over and stepped for the first time with a slight thud into Madeleine's room. It was only as his night-accustomed eyes saw her sit bolt upright in bed and put her hands to her head, and she emitted an ear-shattering scream that he realised what he had done.

"It's only me, Madeleine," he whispered hoarsely. "I had to have a talk."

"Go away, you horrible man! Go away!" Then she began to sob, the racking sobs of shock.

But doors opening, the sounds of feet, a light on the landing, the Colonel's excited shouts: "Where is it? What the hell's happened? What's wrong? Oh my God, what a fearful yell!"

Imperturbable Elspeth: "It was Madeleine."

She sobbed on. "Sssh!" Digby hissed. He could knife himself and her; he could fall dead. "Say you had a nightmare."

The Colonel hammering on the door. "My dear child, what's wrong? What happened, Madeleine?" He sounded much upset. He loved her dearly.

"Nightmare," she wailed at the top of the register. Now she started to laugh, wild sobs of laughter.

"There, there," cried the Colonel. "You poor girl. Oh Nanda Devi, what can I do? It's serious." He rattled the door in distress. "Elspeth, go and fetch her husband, fetch that idiot Digby P.! Quick, girl, quick! We'll have to break the door down. Oh my God, there there now, Madeleine." Elspeth pattering down the staircase.

"I'm here, Colonel," said Digby loudly. "I heard her and I came along."

"Come back, Elspeth. He's here already." After that a pregnant silence beyond the door while Madeleine's sobs and laughter grew less desperate, less frequent, subsided and almost stopped. She lay on her side in bed. Oh Lord above, he thought. What have I done?

"I'm all right, Farquie dear," she gulped. "I had a horrible dream. Better now."

"You'll call if you need me?" growled the Colonel. "Promise?"

"Yes," Madeleine gave a long tremorous snuffle and was still.

After that there were mutterings from outside. The Colonel talked to himself and Elspeth. Parts came through: "... A brutal streak. I suspected it. But never interfere between man and wife, never never if you value your skin. Take my tip, Elspeth ..."

"Bed, Father." Elspeth was quite unmoved.

"Never interfere. Never," he mumbled, shuffling off. "Oh, what a bloody life it is. Never, never ..."

The door closed, and the old house was quiet. Digby looked down at Madeleine with penitence and self-reproach, and his thoughts sped away at a tangent: Three hundred and fifty years, and there must have been many a rumpus at Glendrogan, but has a man ever climbed into the bedroom of his wife and frightened her out of her wits, all with good intentions just to have a talk, trying unselfishly to patch things up? Everything I do goes wrong. Couldn't I ever get a break?

She turned to look at him over her left shoulder. In the dimness he could see the soft familiar feminine curve of her jawbone, and the unfamiliar tears on her face. She *is* beautiful, he thought. She's damnably sad and beautiful.

"Are you crazy?" she whispered, not sadly but with anger. "Are you crazy or drunk again or what?"

"Crazy." He nodded his head miserably. "And a bit high I guess." Nod. "And I couldn't sleep." Nod. "Everything's hell." He was sorry for himself. "I had to talk to you."

"So you climb in my window after midnight and give me the worst fright ..."

"I'm sorry, Madeleine. I tried the door, but it was locked."

"You didn't. I would have heard the handle."

"I tell you I did. Are you going to call me a liar too?"

" Oh, go away. You're a pain in the neck."

" I just want to talk to you."

" What about? "

" About us."

" What about us? What's there to talk about? "

But he couldn't think. What about them? What exactly had he come to say? And the things he had intended to say, like: *I know my duty if you don't know yours*, and like: *try again, if only for appearances' sake*, they would send her right off the deep end. She was leaning on her elbow, staring at him. She was wearing a white diaphanous thing. It was chilly too, and the waning moon must have risen because he could see her face and more of her quite clearly now. Digby shivered in his dressing-gown. " Why d'you have to team up with Hamish and Galbraith and ride me all day every day? "

She looked at him for a long time not answering until a last after-sob racked her head and shoulders; she frowned at that. " I haven't had a wink of sleep. Do go away."

" I'll go," but he hesitated. Why hadn't she slept? " You aren't taking it too hard about that guy, Hamish, are you? He's an unscrupulous . . ."

" He's a man at least. Better than being a pompous prig."

" Who's a pompous pig? "

" Piggy-Diggy, you are. You even get drunk with a halo. I bet you were serving mankind when you embraced that creature."

Which was untrue. In his times with Fiona he had not given a thought to the welfare of mankind. But he could hardly say so. " You do hate me, don't you? "

" I just despise you."

" Good night then." Digby turned away. He was low, not angry.

" Good night and see you-in-the-morning, see you a picture of dignity at breakfast, picture of the husband who ran to his wife's scream. You don't think he believed that, do you? "

" I don't give a damn what he believes," in a throaty whisper half-way to the door.

" Sssh! They'll hear. Digby, why *did* you come? "

" Because I couldn't stand it."

" Couldn't stand what? "

"Not being able to sleep, and you jeering at me, and it stinks parading our differences under the same roof for Galbraith to see."

She sighed and lay down again. "I know. So it was just because of appearances?"

"No." The real reason why he had come struck through his careful, demented edifice of self-deception. He went to the bed and stood over her. Madeleine stared up at him. She still hadn't bothered to cover her top-half. It was cold. He shivered. Should he say it or not say it? "I came because I was damn' lonely and damn' jealous if you want to know," he muttered disagreeably.

She smiled. Wasn't it amazing you could have been married to this girl for ten years? "Poor frozen Digby. Come in beside me and get warm. We can talk better."

He put his head into her shoulder. The skin was cold, then it was warm. Everything was warm and comforting. "You gave me an awful scare."

"I must have been crazy—desperate, I guess. I'm sorry Madeleine."

"You're a strange man."

She was not like Madeleine used to be, not like Fiona either. She had some sense and a sense of humour. But never comparisons. Oh no never comparisons.

"Tell me why you came over."

"Why do you think? To rescue you from that woman's clutches. Then I changed my mind."

"Because of Hamish?"

"Yes. But it was only because he was terribly attractive in a bad way I'd never known before. He did something to me."

"What did he do to you?"

"Nothing. That's true too, darling, except kiss me. What did she do to you?"

"Nothing." Shame on Digby; wise Digby whether she believed him or not. "You've become a new sort of woman since you came here. I wouldn't know it was you."

She stirred closer in his arms like a child in a way, yet not of course. "I didn't mean it about you being pompous and priggish, darling. You're almost human now at last. That's the absurd thing."

" Almost? "

She giggled. " Yes, almost. You even make quite good jokes."

" Say altogether."

" Altogether if you love me, and never look at that wench again. Promise? "

" Promise."

" Am I as nice a dish as she is? "

Women aren't gentlemen, are they, no sense of propriety. Take care: " Nobody in the world could be as nice now as you. Not ten Fionas or ten anybodies."

" We're not just one person, darling. We explore, and out comes a person we didn't know was there. We have so many hidden facets of ourselves down under the repressions."

Which was out of the old Madeleine book. Oh, forget that. " It'll be good to meet sensible people again. Do you like the mad Scotch? "

" These ones aren't exactly typical are they? But I love Farquie. I think he's very sweet and awful. And Hamish is unique. As for Fiona Kilburnie of the Stags, I hate her man-mad guts."

" Fiona's not a woman's woman. She's too much woman."

Madeleine gave a light feminine snarl strangely reminiscent of someone else. He kissed her and she kissed him back.

" We owe a lot to the Highland air or the Highland clans or something."

She laughed. " I'd like to keep you here always. I know you'll be the same old ponderous paragon after a week in that office. Is it true you made your speech at the Gathering in *verse*? I can't believe it. You didn't write a poem, did you, darling? "

" Sort of."

" Can I see it? "

He shook his head. She certainly could not. If she saw it she would laugh, which would be the beginning again. " No."

" Please, Digby. I'd love to read your little rhyme in kilts."

" No, I said."

She smiled, and went off on another tack: " Did you get my letter? "

" Yes, I got it." and he nearly added: *I've been browsing over the*

old books ever since, but stopped himself. He did not want to hurt her feelings. There had to be this gap between them. You couldn't have everything; you never could. It was true what she said about each of us being so many hidden people, kind and sadistic, generous and close, and so on and so on.

" You know, darling, one of the nicest things about being together again is that we can conspire against these people. I bet Farquie's listening in now."

" He thinks I'm a wife beater."

" He says I'm a typical American woman. That's why he dotes on me."

" It's nearly three. I'll have to go."

But it was later than three when Digby returned to his North Wing by the inner route.

There was a stately formality in the Colonel's bow. " Good morning, Ross," he said, and continued helping himself to bacon, eggs and devilled kidneys. He was the greatest little man for offal.

" What's on to-day? " asked Digby.

" No more than usual. The same old round, the mundane task. I shall have a look at my Lilium Pardalinum Gigantium, my giant beast. He might be flowering after that rain. He'd better hurry if he isn't going to miss the bus. Oh dear, the thought of another year gone by. I wish I was confident of Heaven. Do you feel confident, Digby P.? Do you think you'll force your inimitable way through Peter's gate? "

Digby had seen Galbraith before breakfast snooping for footprints along the path below Madeleine's window. " No," he said. " Neither me nor you, Colonel. Let's face it."

Here came Madeleine humming down the stairs. She couldn't sing, but she had a deep good hum; she danced into the dining-room and said: " Good morning, everyone. No, don't get up, Farquie." She kissed him on his bald pate from behind. It might have been any other Highland morning.

" Gracious you smell good, my dear," said the Colonel, delighted. " Help yourself to absolutely everything." She went to the sideboard.

" Elspeth, where's the marmalade? "

" Moloney's opening a new one. I offered, but she said Get out." Elspeth smiled. Love had worked wonders for her. She no longer glowered. Her hair was in rude waves. She wore a thick dust of powder on dumpling cheeks and gashes of lipstick. She was full of secrets.

Madeleine came back with egg and bacon. Her eyes slid across Digby. He was mad about her. He wanted to chase her into some dark corner now right away.

" I'm sorry about last night," she said. " I must have given you such a scare, Farquie, but it was my nightmare, the same one I've had ever since I was a little girl." She shuddered. " Oh, it's so awful. I find myself at the window, always at the window, I can never remember anything about it except this terrifying unknown that makes me scream and scream." Madeleine shuddered again. " Oh well, it's all over until next time," she added bravely, " and they aren't very frequent."

It was convincing. Golly, how the girls can lie. If the Colonel had had suspicions, he forgot about them. He winced, leaned across, patted her hand and said: " Oh, my poor child, I do feel for you. You must have a quiet day and rest your nerves."

The door opened, and in swept Bridget Moloney. She always swept wherever she went, being a woman of noble gait and stature. But what a difference since the evening of the gala dinner. Then she had taken them within her all-embracing compass of benevolence. Now, a short six days later, she moved in smouldering majesty, bearing the pot of Cooper's on a silver tray. So strong, so compelling was her presence, that she hushed them instantly. Her house-coat was blue-white starched perfection; she was a very fine lady in the middle years.

Galbraith gave her one look. Then his head sank into hunched shoulders as she thumped the marmalade down before him. " Thanks, Mistress Moloney," he mumbled. " Excellent devilled kidneys."

But she was not aggressive when she spoke. " Colonel, Sir dear," she said with a quaver, " this old house is haunted. You should of told me before I was scared out of me wits."

" Haunted? " he said, sitting up straight. " Why, impossible, Mrs. Moloney. There's no Glendrogan ghost."

She stared at him. " The wail of the banshee in the night. 'Twas the same I heard in me Uncle Patrick's house in Ballybunion out there against the wind howling too from America, and four days later his poor drowned body with a sad smile on it come sprawled on the tide. It's death for one of us in this place."

" Oh no, Mrs. Moloney. It wasn't a banshee. I had a dreadful nightmare and I screamed. I was just telling them about it. I'm terribly sorry to scare you."

Bridget Moloney shook her head. " That was never a woman's cry, floating in upon me in the wind of the night with the owl-bird's hoot and the scuffle of footsteps past my door at the end of the lonely house." She shivered. " There's wicked spirits in the air. Could I see you alone, Colonel dear? "

" Of course, Mistress Moloney. Immediately after breakfast." He slumped into deeper dejection as her footsteps marched away. " Eheu, fugaces," he muttered. " This is it. Nobody cares a damn about whether I starve." He glared balefully at the others, even at Madeleine.

" Don't take it too hard, Farquie dear. There must be other cooks."

" Not like Bridget Moloney. She's a culinary Rembrandt. When I think of that soufflé like a fluff of chocolate swansdown, and the fricassée of grouse, and her tart succulent creamy Bortsch, and her crêpes suzettes, all those in a week or less. You selfish young people don't understand. You don't see that food is my only fun." He groaned.

" And there's always whisky," Digby said. He shouldn't have.

" Hold your tongue! " snarled the Colonel. They finished breakfast in silence.

Look at me, he willed Madeleine, and she did for about a second, serene, relaxed, expressionless. She was a new dark wife. She threw Fiona for a loop.

He waited on the lawn afterwards. It was a brisk morning, and he could taste the early autumn of the Scottish Highlands, not quite here but coming. Colonel Galbraith had been interviewing Bridget Moloney in the smoking-room. He came out now and shut the french window behind him.

They walked together in the Giant Lily direction. "I do like that woman," he said after a while. "I'm drawn to her."

"Did she give notice?"

"Alas. She says the Banshee was only the final straw. She says she gets lonelier and lonelier in the North Wing, and next week when you leave the room above, it would be worse. Seems to like you too, Digby P., God knows why women like you. God knows I wouldn't if I was a woman. Well, she's lonely for one thing, and she says the kitchen's outmoded, and Dougald was unkind to her yesterday over the amount of coal he had to carry in. She burst into tears at that point. Poor Bridget Moloney, I tried to comfort her. You know, Digby P., the big girls are the ones who feel life's knocks. People don't realise how sensitive they are, but *I* know, because they're my type. What's your type, Digby P.? Or are you an omnivorous wolf?"

"Oh, dear me no," said Digby. After one recent regrettable coppery lapse, he knew his type better than ever, not that he believed in types. He believed in Madeleine Ross. But it was not a subject he cared to discuss with the inquisitive Galbraith. "When does Mother Moloney leave?" he asked.

"End of next week. She was terribly distressed. She said nobody loved her and nobody appreciated her; and again about how unkind Dougald was; I've a bloody good mind to sack the feller. Oh it was quite heartbreaking to hear in that caressing Irish voice; so I said what a wizard cook she was; and then she said cooking wasn't everything."

The Colonel stopped, kicked nervously at the moss underfoot. "Here am I a lonely old chap, deserted by everyone, and a marvellous super-duper thoroughbred of a cuisinière comes along, and the next thing is she deserts me too. What I wonder is, Digby P., you tell me. What I wonder is, should I offer to marry the woman and give her a Father's affection and she would look after my tummy? There would have to be a clear understanding of no funny business, no interference with Damon Runyon. I read Baseball Hattie once a week; not to mention the Big Umbrella, and Nicely-Nicely and all the rest. It's a busy late-night skedaddle, as you people would say,

and I'm too old now to start old tricks." Colonel Galbraith was wrought up. His false teeth clicked. "What about it, Digby P.?"

"I'm afraid, Colonel," Digby said gravely, "I'm afraid you wouldn't have much in common, except only your stomach. If you want my opinion, I think Bridget Moloney's a very very full-blooded woman, by no means content to play second fiddle to an author. She says nobody loves her. Well, there's a small matter I wondered whether I should mention to you . . . . . ."

"No!" cried the Colonel. "I can't believe it!" He held on to a silver birch, laughed himself purple, calmed down, then croaked: "It's a slender hope, but worth trying. You see, Dougald's mad old cousin who's cooked for him from the year dot, she was finally carted off to the looney bin a month ago. Dougald is a confirmed bachelor, though. He's had many a fling, but he does cherish his independence. I wonder. What a heaven sent solution it would be! He could live in the Big House too, and keep her happy, and I'd even stretch a point and throw in his meals, although God knows I can't afford it, but anything for a peaceful old age." The Colonel paused, then barked like a machine gun getting under way after a stoppage. "It's all your damn' fault. You got me into this because of Elspeth. You bloody well get me out."

"I'll have a try," said Digby, who was aware that he had bull-dozed the Colonel in young Lachlan's cause. They walked farther. Sun slanted to dappled birches, the leaves were not yet dry, grey lichen clung to the north side of trunks. *Autumn!* everything seemed to say, yet love was the human motif.

"Look!" screamed Galbraith. "Just look! My beast has bloomed." He broke into a shuffling trot through bracken and nettles.

"Isn't he wonderful? Isn't he the most splendid lily you ever saw?" It was one single flower among closed buds, truly a splendid bloom, vermilion-red shading to orange to deep yellow in the centre with dark spots. It stood alone on its stout green stalk, vivid under a shaft of sun in the dark wood. The Colonel reached up a finger to touch, then stood in silence.

"Very fine," said Digby, and expressed suitable admiration. It was a bit too much of a flamboyant beast of a lily for his taste, but he

knew its importance to his host and cousin-in-law and now fellow matchmaker. " Well, I shall hunt for Dougald."

" Dougald? " said the Colonel. " Oh yes. I'll stay a bit." He had forgotten about cooks and stomachs. He stared at his lily.

Digby went down to the square-walled garden. The door squeaked shut behind him and he was inside that sequestered place. Here the Glendrogan peaches grew against a southern wall, and here the flowers for the house and here the vegetables. There was a closed feeling and a good mix of scent.

Dougald was singing in the far corner. He sang a Gaelic song, light and thoughtful and melancholy as he picked green peas. " ' Sad am I without thee.' "

" I'm in a sore condeetion, Mr. Ross. My peas is near over too, that big and hard you could crack your teeth on them. I don't know what cook's to say. Mebbe she'll tak the besom to me again." He sighed. " Has Mr. Ross made Mistress Moloney's acquaintance? "

" I have," said Digby with care. " A charming person. And what a superb cook! "

" Ay she's that." They were both gathering pea-pods now, dropping them into the basket. Dougald the sly factotum wore an even more doleful face than usual. " We was getting along grand till yesterday forenoon when I says to her in a daft wee joke like: *Cookie*, I says. *I'll be down the mines afore we know where we are, worrkin' seams for my coal-eating Mammy.*

" *Out of my kitchen, ye dirty little bit of a spalpeen*, she shouts at me. Then she takes up the besom, and I gets off my marks. The lassies is a mystery to me, specially cooks. Would Mr. Ross understand it? "

" She mightn't like the suggestion of extravagance, and she might not want to be your coal-eating Mammy," Digby said after consideration. " Perhaps she thinks of you in a different way. Were you just friends before, or did my eyes and ears deceive me the other evening when I walked past the kitchen? "

Dougald's face remained impassive. He had the most dead-pan countenance. " Yon nicht I chanced on Mr. Ross and Fiona takin' a dander, well I dinna ken what it could be that gives me the itch after meeting you but I says to myself: *I'll away up to the Bighoose*

just for to see what's what with the new Cookie. Sure enough she was the brawest wumman I ever set eyes on. Love at first sight at my time o' life with a muckle wumman twice my size. It's a disturbance, Mr. Ross."

" She's given notice," Digby said. " Time is short."

Dougald groaned. " Mr. Ross has a big knowledge and experience. What would Mr. Ross advise? "

" To take a mercenary angle, I think you must weigh the loss of freedom and the risks of physical assault by a large and loving woman apt to wield the broom stick, weigh this against the manifold advantages of delicious food and so on etcetera. But the right approach is to say to yourself: *Can I live without Bridget Moloney?* "

Dougald groaned again. " Mebbe she'd no have me," he said wistfully. " It's a verra serious step for a man to take."

" I fancy she would have you. She told the Colonel twice this morning that you had been unkind. That word ' unkind ' does hint at a tender feeling. Now, if you were married and had a suite of your own in the North Wing, she could cook for you as well as for the Colonel. In my opinion that would be life on the pig's back, Dougald, and more scope for Bridget's energies than if you lived in your cottage."

" So it would," said Dougald. " No argy-bargy? No deductions from the wages? "

" Oh, I'm sure not. The Colonel would be only too happy."

" Was this what Mr. Ross came to speak about? "

" Certainly not. I came to pass the time of day, and you asked me for my advice. I must say, Dougald, that love seems to play a large part in this district."

" It's grown something terrible since Mr. Ross come," said the sly dog.

" What if she takes the besom to me? " Dougald asked later, when they had nearly finished shelling peas in love's cause in the potting-shed.

" She won't. The rose is your insurance. A red red rose works an infallible charm on any woman. No jokes though, Dougald, none of your devious humour. A proposal should be honest and manly but never funny. Quite clear? Let's go get that rose."

" It's the first time I ever done it. I'm fair shiverin' in ma breeks. I could do wi' a dram."

" You shall have one," Digby said. " I'll bring it to the shrubbery."

" *Schlanch*," said Dougald among the rhododendrons. He was a piper, and he took in his whisky as only good pipers can—right down the throat in one fiery draught and a swallocking smack of the lips after. " Man," he said. " Yon's an encouragement." He picked up his new basket, the lining of cabbage leaves, the mountain of large, too large, green peas, the velvety scarlet rose on top, a tasteful arrangement.

Am I a marriage counsellor? Digby wondered. Am I a love bureau? Is that my true metier in life? Is all for the best in this best of all possible worlds? Is all for the bonniest in this bonniest of all impossible glens?

He paused in the porch. " I did want to have a grand big wedding," Fiona was saying. " I mean after all, Madeleine, it's the most important day in a girl's life when she finally gives herself to a man, which is why big weddings are the right thing even if you're absolutely broke like Hamish and me, but he just says: *Getting spliced up is all that matters.* Anyway, I'm jolly well wearing the satin wedding dress Nanny's making. Nanny's terribly pleased. She says she knew all along that Hamie was the one I loved. But I do think he's mean the way he bosses me, boss boss boss just as if I was a concubine or something. Don't you think so, Madeleine? "

" I know," said Madeleine in a soothing cosy tone. " But they're all the same, Fiona. Now take my Digby . . ."

" Oh, *Digby's* different. Digby's always so kind and considerate just like an uncle or something, or perhaps he's too good-looking to be an uncle really."

My God, Digby thought. What's she going to come out with next? He stepped heavily through the hall and into the smoking-room. The two of them were in armchairs.

" Good morning, Fiona," he said heartily. " How's everything? "

She pouted, lolling in Highland dress, with nylons, his. " Not very good," she said. " I was just thinking I wished Hamie was more like you and less like him Digby, but you can't have everything though can you? "

"No, Fiona," he said. "Hamish wouldn't be him if he was me, now, would he?" What an asininity, and in her own garbled mode of speech, but he had caught Madeleine's eye. He was perfectly innocent. It was amazing how he could see Fiona's charms unmoved. But Madeleine's gaze had a steely quality, as of a female hawk watching for shenanigans in the nesting season. "You wish Hamish was more like dear old Uncle Digby," he said. "And I guess, for all I know, he wishes you were more like Auntie Madeleine. True love sets such a high standard for the adored one." Madeleine laughed.

But Fiona was cross. "He doesn't! He wants me to be me. *Just be yourself my poppet*, he keeps saying. Last night he said there wasn't another woman in the world like me, that's what he said."

"And he was quite right too, never said a truer word. There, there, Fiona."

She sniffed. "You make the silliest American kind of jokes sometimes, Digby." But she calmed down and continued: "Well it's to be in the Kirk of course but we're not sending out printed invitations because Hamish says it's a matter of principle although he says he's a man with practically no principles but he's waited so long to get a hold on me that he isn't going to tempt providence now even if it does mean fewer wedding presents. I don't really understand that do you Madeleine?"

"No, I don't Fiona. It sounds screwy to me, but Hamish is a very logical person so there must be some reason I suppose. Go on."

"Then we're having a reception at the Birks, just everybody local and some relations, and a man called Pranger Potter who was in Hamish's squadron, *my pal Pranger* is what he calls him, this man Pranger is flying some wonderfully cheap champagne over from Belgium or one of those places but it's supposed to be a secret because he's using an Air Force plane and that isn't exactly allowed. No I can't have a drink Digby he says it makes me smell but if you're very insistent I'll have to have just one a decent one out of politeness.

"Well then afterwards I'm going to be standing in the Ballroom under the great chandelier and everyone will file past to kiss the bride. Have you seen our chandelier Madeleine?"

Madeleine shook her head and smiled.

"It's much the biggest and most famous chandelier in Scotland.

I showed it to Digby one time. Then next will be the speeches. We'll have to allow Uncle Farquhar to make a speech because he's giving me away although Hamish said *That old Bazooka ought to be forbidden to open his mouth in public.* Then the Bridegroom, and the last of all is from the Best Man. I do hope Digby's going to make a rhyming speech like for the Gathering. You *will* do another lovely poem won't you for my wedding?"

"No," said Digby. "Not on your life. Sorry, Fiona."

"Oh but you must, darling," from Madeleine. "They expect it."

"Nothing doing."

"That's gudgey," hissed Fiona.

"I do think you're mean," mocked Madeleine.

"We're going to have Highland Dancing after the speeches, and then of course we're having a buffet as well as a cake but it's all so terribly expensive and we haven't got a bean between us and we were saying to one another just last night that we can't really live in two houses at the same time I mean it would be a waste sort of so we had a brilliant idea that you might like to take the Birks for the grouse and stalking next year and if you could let us have the rent in advance it would be a marvellous help Digby."

"That's a very very kind offer, Fiona, and I do appreciate it. But we have other plans for next year. Also I think, perhaps, people here may possibly have formed an exaggerated estimate of my financial resources, which, I may say, are by no means inexhaustible, and there have been unexpectedly heavy drains . . ."

"Now now, darling, this isn't the annual report. I think I could let you have a little, Fiona, if it would help."

"It would be a *marvellous* help, Madeleine. You're awfully sweet." She glared resentfully at Digby, and muttered: "You've a bruty side too."

"Bruty! Fiona, you say such wonderful things." Madeleine laughed and laughed. They had teamed up on him, this ravishing pair of hellions.

"I'll give you one toast-rack with my blessings," he remarked, and stalked to the window, and saw Balgersho's monoplane glide in for a landing.

"I can hear him!" cried Fiona. "Oh, here he comes. Am I all right, Madeleine?"

"You look wonderful."

Fiona downed her whisky, got rid of the glass, composed her limbs and sat primly. What this man had done to her was nothing short of awe-inspiring.

Here he came now, the wicked Baron, in faded kilt and khaki shirt and old tweed jacket. "Hallo, my poppet," he said, but did not go to her. He loped across and stood with hands on hips looking down at Madeleine.

"Hallo, Hamish," she said after a few seconds, amused and then uneasy. "Why the scrutiny?"

"I see you've made it up. Well done, Digby old boy. I'm delighted.

The blush was one of Madeleine's very best. She looked around wildly. She giggled. "You're an awful man."

"Come here," growled Fiona. "I want you."

"Now now, my love," Hamish said, not without a trace of nervousness. "Behave yourself in public. We'd better go outside." Which they did.

"Let's go upstairs," said Digby, "and discuss plans together."

They were mounting the stairs to discuss plans together when peals and gales of laughter sounded through the green baize door, and the full-throated croonings of Bridget Moloney: "Ah, Dougald, me bad blarney boy!"

The red rose had worked.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE BRIDE in her satin dress, wearing two sashes not just one—the green gold scarlet of Kilburnie, the grey blue saffron of dress Tarr draped from each shoulder to meeting at the Brooch. Her eyes downcast beneath the veil, demure, leaning on tubby Uncle's arm.

Hamish in full regalia of doublet, kilt and lace, of hose and sporran, of belt and dirk, of buckled shoe, of skean d'hu.

Elspeth, sole Bridesmaid, wearing a powder-blue confection, slimming her bulges, lengthening her stocky lines, all thanks to Madeleine's unerring eye, thanks to Nanny's gifted needle, thanks again to Madeleine for make-up. Elspeth almost comely.

Lastly, Digby in his dark grey suit, a courtly American, that rare and priceless export. You meet him buying groceries or gas, you meet him in the coach, you meet him on the farm. Why does he leave himself at home, or lose himself in brassy gangs abroad?

And everything gone well except for a near-slip by Lachlan. Poor young Minister with his slip of paper and the names, saying to himself all day: *Fiona, Fiona, now remember it's Fiona. Please God let me remember it's Fiona*—until the thing obsesses him, until his tongue plays wilful knave and he begins: *I Elsp* . . . and stops in agonised distress, and Fiona hisses: *Idjut!* with most unbridal venom, and her caddish Uncle titters.

Bride and Bridegroom stood in the ballroom at the Birks while guests streamed in through the East Tower door, and all was formal for the greeting. Country folk in stiff dark Sunday suits and best black dresses, they were the majority. Among them a smattering of stalkers and keepers in jazzy knickerbocker suits, a sporting Diplomatic

Corps with doyen, of course, the dignified MacLagan. Among them too a job lot of relations, indeed a motley crew these lairds and rangy dames.

Digby and Pranger Potter opened champagne. Pop! went the corks. Pop, pop and healthy pop again and pop. The unknown vintage sounded good. It looked good too, whether in tumbler, sherry glass or goblet, for these were a polyglot collection, the last survivors of a cut-glass army, priceless in sets, not very valuable, alas, in ones and twos.

"I say, Dig," said Pranger, who had joined Jake Doon in this economical diminutive. He was a gargantuan man with a black moustache which made a wisp of the Colonel's appendage. "I say, old Dig, talk about atomic crackerjack! Lord take me for an inverted loop. Lord stall me in the drink. I never in my born days saw a twin-boom fuselage like that." He gazed with simple awe at Lady Balgersho, née Fiona Kilburnie of the Birks, Chieftain etcetera.

"The poor guy's gonna have plenty on his hands."

Pranger's mirth boomed along the Ballroom, resounded from the walls and echoed from the ceiling. The Colonel had given him many a pint of ale and then the pair of them had switched to champagne out of tankards, which spells danger to the oldest hand. Pranger was in fine form. All the chatter ceased now, and heads turned. For a short moment Pranger stole the show. "What a wizard chap you are, old Dig," he gasped.

"Digby!" It was Fiona. A frown had sped across her face.

"Yes, Fiona!" he called back.

"Take your place in line!"

He had been too busy up to now to join the congratulatory queue. But this was a summons, a command he must obey. He hastened to do so, and had uneasy recollection of the first time they had met beneath that chandelier.

Where's Madeleine? he thought. I'd better take her with me just in case; and anyway, husband and wife should go together. You never know with Fiona. She might overdo things for the sake of Auld Lang Syne.

He found Madeleine near the door. "Hallo darling," she said, and smiled.

She wore a dress of navy blue with white collar and white cuffs, artfully simple, exactly right for a dark beauty on a blonde beauty's day. She flaunted a scarlet hat. She looked as if any moment she might take off to join the elves and fairies; yet Madeleine was a substantial girl.

That's why I am so mad about her, Digby thought. The elusive thing was always there, but now she has the other too. "Come with me a minute."

She came. They slipped out past the wedding guests, the aroma of lavender, moth balls, soap and honest sweat. They climbed the East Tower stairs and into that deep-embrasured room where once he had eaten grouse and strawberries. "What do you want?" she asked, knowing quite well.

"Oh, darling," she said in a minute or two, "I wish I could keep you in Scotland always. I know what'll happen when we get back. You'll be a business fiend again, with a briefcase every night, and that pre-occupied perfect air, and no interest in me or anything but work. That's what I've been thinking all this week."

"And you'll have your artists and musicians, and new poets to discover. That's what I've been thinking."

She stiffened in his arms, and came back. "Isn't it mad, both of us worrying about going home? I guess it isn't really possible to alter except in a strange transient environment."

Which was a little old Madeleinish.

"We'd better go down and pay our respects. Fiona told me to take my place in line."

"Was that why you brought me up here first? Was it wife insurance, Digby? I know there's something about that chandelier."

"Of course there isn't." They went downstairs and joined the line which moved on quickly. Now Madeleine's turn to exchange cheeks with Fiona under the chandelier. Then Digby himself and no question she was thinking of that first time: "Look up at the Cairngorm, Digby."

They craned their necks back, and she murmured, "Good-bye, Digby. I wonder if a girl can love a second man just a teeny bit underneath."

"Quite impossible," he mumbled as their chins rolled down and

their lips met in a kiss from which he soon disengaged himself. Fiona meant no harm, no infidelity. She was saying good-bye to all that, as the best of girls do on their wedding days.

Hamish finished with Madeleine too. "You look good enough to eat," he said, in order to make her blush, and loud enough to annoy Fiona, who closed upon him jealously at once, forgetting her late lover and last scion of the Prissitulchan Sept.

The guests had nearly all passed by. "Come here, Pranger."

Pranger was there at the double. He wore uniform, his broad chest stacked with ribbons—D.S.O.'s and D.F.C.'s and the Silver Star and the Croix de Guerre and every campaign you could imagine. Pranger was the true fighter-boy potato. "Anything I can do, Wings?"

"You see that old beezer with the beard? MacLagan by name. He's as teetotal as I am, but there's no love lost between us and never has been. He had the bloody nerve to say just now that he hoped marriage would be the makings of me. Fill him up with champagne, Pranger. From now on this is your only job. Quite clear?"

"Okey Doke, Wings. I'll fix the bastard up."

"Get cracking, then."

Pranger departed as two late guests arrived. "Oh, Lord Balgersho, it was so kind of you to let us come. Wasn't it Cy-Cy?"

"It certainly was," said Cyrus Becker. He had the grace to look a little sheepish.

Not so his gifted wife and colleague. "The most ravishing bride I've ever seen," she murmured, cataloguing Fiona's appearance. "Do please present us."

But Fiona had drawn herself up, and stood motionless except for the rise and fall of her twin sashes. She stared with the utmost disdain across the ballroom. It was the look of Victoria when not amused. It was her frozen face, which Digby had never seen before. It struck silence into the whole assembly, a hush broken only by distant bellowings from the Park, for the rutting season had just begun, and the two Royal Stags now clashed all day, not in mock battles, but in furious frustrated combat.

"Fiona, you haven't met Cyrus Becker and Carmen Graves. Mr. and Mrs. Becker, I should say."

Not a muscle stirred in the matchless hauteur of her face.

Whereupon Hamish showed how well fitted he and he alone was to be the husband of this Chieftain. "Now now, Queenie," he said. "That'll never do. No dramatics on your wedding day. Be nice, my Poppet." And he dealt a loud spank upon her shapely bottom.

She'll tear his eyes out, Digby thought. But Fiona did not. She gave way to the extent of a slow inclination of the head and a handshake. "Welcome," she said, and nodded dismissal.

Carmen Graves Becker led her husband on. It was possible that in Fiona she had met her match. She said to Digby: "I hope *you* don't bear any grudge against us, Mr. Ross. It's our job, you know, and we have to do it, however badly we sometimes feel. And of course, an eminent person like yourself . . ."

"A rich Republican playboy," he said on ice, and turned. "A drink-sodden Ambassador, Mr. Becker?"

"I'm sorry, Digby," said Cyrus Becker. "I really am a heel."

"We 're both sorry," Carmen said. "I'll tell you why. You see it was covering your case that finally brought us together after the years. We'd no sooner filed our cables that afternoon than Cy-Cy said: *To hell with it, let's get married.* Didn't you, darling?"

"Sure did," cooed Becker. "It's thanks to you we're where we are." He squeezed his wife. They were maudlin.

"Or could it be the Highland air," said Digby. But he was afraid it was him again.

"So I wondered," Carmen said. "So we just wondered if we couldn't make amends somehow. Would you let us each do a piece on you and your charming wife—she is so ideally the American woman to-day as we all like to think of her. Just one picture of you both against the old castle wall. Do let us . . ."

"Hmm," said Digby. A picture of him and Madeleine reconciled? A story? It might quell the gossip. "I'll ask her."

He went to consult Madeleine, but she did not take kindly to the idea. In fact she was much annoyed. "How dare you even suggest it," she hissed in the wedding crowd. "How dare you, like some old Turk flaunting his harem. What do you think I am?"

"Sorry. Sorry, Madeleine. I only thought . . ." He retreated. *I mean well*, he said to himself. *And look what I get.*

"Find yourselves glasses one and all!" It was the Colonel. He had clambered upon a table; he wore an unusually benign expression; he swayed a little from the hips, more perhaps from the generous rhythm of his mood than from unstable equilibrium; he held a full pint tumbler of champagne. "Jeldi now!" he called. "I have an intolerable thirst which cannot be long denied."

Soon the whole company had glasses. "Your Grace," he began. "M'Lords and m'Ladies, Hereditary whatnots, Master of the Eagles, Scouts and Guides, Ladies and Gents, Bride and Groom and good old Prissitulchan."

My God! Digby thought. *What's coming?*

"It is indeed a pride and privilege on this most unparalleled occasion to propose the health of the bride whom I have just had the ineffable pleasure of handing over. We all of us know Fiona. We know of her beauty; indeed that stands out a mile for all to see. We know of her wisdom, which lurks just up the glen. We remember her adorable girlhood pranks. We admire her loving care of Clan Kilburnie and the Septs. Her gentle nature, her selfless disposition, her angelic spirit—are all bywords in these parts, in this neck of the woods as my dear friend Digby Prissitulchan Ross would say . . ."

Just what I wouldn't say. Digby glanced over the crowd at Fiona. Her lips were parted. She glowed with pleasure, looked at her husband, looked at herself. She was lapping it up.

"I'll come back to Fiona in a minute. Now I want to say a few words of welcome to the strangers in our midst. First of all, Squadron Leader Potter, the celebrated Pranger. A Pranger prangs, and that's what old Pranger did. He pranged the Boche clean out of the skies.

"Stand up, young feller! Get on a chair and let them see you."

Pranger rose from the herd. He grinned, which raised the ends of his great moustaches. Everyone clapped and Pranger bridled.

"Just look at him! Isn't he wonderful? Speak to them, Pranger!"

Pranger shook his head. "I did prang a few," he boomed. "But nothing to Wings. Oh, my gilded oath, you should have seen the squirts old Wings dealt out." He snarled like a Merlin engine, swung his great hand like a stooping Spitfire, and disappeared amid applause.

"So much for Pranger. Next I extend hearty welcome on your

behalf to two representatives of our great sister nation and staunch ally . . ."

This is it, Digby thought. But he was wrong.

" That ship of Democracy over the seas, that dispenser of sugar and spice and sage advice. I welcome Cyrus Becker and Carmen Graves, a pair of Newshawks from the U.S.A. Stand up, you two! "

Graves and Becker stood for all to see. They were used to this. They smiled all round and at one another.

" They're well known," went on the Colonel, " believe it or not! They're famous old jeep-mates; think of that! They came to sample our Scottish justice; they stayed bewitched by our Highland air. *They're married!* Oh, how welcome they are to one another! What a blissfully-assorted couple! Thank you."

There was polite applause. The Beckers stood down, gratified if a little perplexed by these Galbraithian salvoes. All in all the Colonel had let them off lightly. He paused, smacked lips, and said: " Sorry, my thirst won't wait." He swigged down half his tumbler; a lot of other dry people followed his example. " Good God! " he said, looking at the remaining liquid. " What kind of hooch is this? Well, I'm nearly done. All my superlatives are exhausted; I wish I'd kept a few for Digby P. and Madeleine Ross . . ."

The audience, which had been torpid, came to life, and cheers rang out.

The Colonel held up his hand. " Madeleine! Where is she? Stand up for us all to see you, Madeleine."

" No, Farquie. I will not."

" Stand up then, Digby P."

" No thank you, Colonel."

" They're shy. Well, never mind. Of Madeleine let me only say shall I compare thee to a summer's day? Or let me only say she epitomizes that glorious dynamic womanhood of our great sister nation and what-not. Madeleine is the bee's knees. In my not so humble opinion she leaves the local product far behind."

The warnings showed about Fiona, but Hamish patted her down, whispered, and she glowed again at whatever he said.

" As for Digby P., words fail me. Just look at this great tycoon and Highland poet and ringmaster in the nuptial circus. All I can

say about Digby P. is that he's our hero and our elder brother. Can I describe his feats with rod and gun and mettlesome right hand? Can I explain the way he keeps me personally in the straight and narrow?" The Colonel paused. He finished on a more moderate and more convincing note. "As a matter of fact I'm going to miss the fool. So are we all, I do believe. Send us a postcard sometimes, Ross."

"Ay," said the measured voice of MacLagan. "We'd like fine to have Mr. Ross postcard us."

All the good people cheered, and there were cries of: "Ye're braw, Digby," and "Man, we'll miss ye," and "God bless Mr. and Mistress Ross."

"Now for the Bride. After long revolting centuries of strife, the Tarrs and Kilburnies have patched it up. They have this day forged a bond. To our toast let us add a pious hope—that from this tardy union will rise a new and better breed. I give you the bride!"

After that there were speeches by Hamish and Digby which lasted about a minute each; there was the cutting of Bridget Moloney's three-tiered cake; there were wedding photographs. Testy Andrew Kilburnie could be heard tuning his pipes outside, while in a far corner of the Ballroom Pranger plied MacLagan. *It's wizard stuff, sir,* he said politely. *It's the latest kind of ginger ale from Belgium.—Is that a fact?* said MacLagan, and took a sip and drained his glass and held it out for more. He was an easy subject. *You'll no fool me,* he said after a while. They were getting on wonderfully well together, what with the champagne and being such disparate types, *Yon's strong drink and the currse of mankind, but I'm not caring the day. I'm drowning my sorrows.—Are you sad, old boy? What's up.—Digby's away is what's up, and him with the makings o' a fisher if he was a wee thing less opinionated. Och, he'll be missed in these parts. I doubt the Currnel'll go back from bad to wurrse in no time. Gie us mair Ginger frae Belgium, Pranger.*

Then Andrew played for the Eightsome Reel and Petronella, for the Dashing White Sergeant and Strip the Willow, and stiff Scottish people cast off reserve, and yells rang out, and feet were merry, such tinkles such twinkles of chandelier, with the Bride and the Bridegroom setting the style. It was like no wedding reception had ever been.

" Some dance! " Digby panted after Stripping the Willow with Fiona—spin like fiends at the head of the set and swing and pivot and swing and swing, and *Now!* she cries, and they fly to the arms of a lady and gent and swing them once and back together to link their elbows to swing again with sashes flying from proud torso, and away to the next ones in the row, meeting that strong soft arm each time, all the way down to the end of the line.

He mopped his brow; the Bride was perfectly cool. " Let me fill your glass," said Digby, and was going to do so when she growled, " What's that gudgey stinker after? "

It was Constable McIntoon at the East Tower door. He shifted from foot to foot, searching the company. Finally his eye lit on Digby, and he took a step forward. " I'll go see."

McIntoon spoke low, with a twitching of moustaches: " Mr. Ross, two Excisemen was here about a flying machine traced away out of Belgium last nicht with smuggled wine, and they had orders for any large assembly to be searched and liquor seized and all guilty parties taken into custody." The Constable spluttered indignantly, toying with that baton. " The verra idea on Miss Fiona's marriage day! "

" Oh Lord," said Digby. " What did you do? "

" I says: *Get off yer marks or take the consequences.*" There was a trusty glitter in McIntoon's eye. " They got," he added succinctly. " Did I do right, Mr. Ross? "

" You certainly did. I congratulate you, Officer. Guard the door against further incursions."

" I'll do that," said the erstwhile envious McIntoon. He stationed himself and looked hopefully for more approval. Now that McIntoon at last had learned the pleasures of being loved, he longed for love all the time.

" Thank you," Digby said. " We're proud of you." With which high praise he rejoined the Bride, his partner.

" Last dance! " screamed the Colonel. He was not quite such a well-trained subaltern as usual. " Positively the last race on the card! Saddle your horses for the Maiden Stakes. I'll lay two to one bar one. Two to one bar Digby P. Partners for the Highland Schottische. All colts and fillies in the ring. MacLagan, you shall be my filly."

He jumped down and wrested MacLagan away from Pranger.

"Nanny would you do me the honour of dancing? You'll have to teach me."

"Och, Mr. Ross!" Such beams of delight, the dear old thing.

Now they are ready, pair by pair. "Right, Andrew!" to that curmudgeon, who blows out his cheeks and spanks his bag and his fingers fly for a nimble tune, and everyone's dancing the Highland Schottische—sideways and forwards and cross and back and "Now for the Burrl," Nanny says, and they spin together and start again.

Who would believe that a plump old dame
Down in the arches and rather lame,
Who would believe she can dance like a sprite
Up on her toes and featherlight?
With flickering feet and cheeks aglow
She teaches her bebby's former beau
A guy called Ross from the U.S.A.
To dance a Schottische on the wedding day.

There's purple Galbraith and teetotal MacLagan
Both Colonel and Keeper have taken rare jag-on
And Bridget Moloney from Dublin town
Hugs Dougald that sly and lugubrious clown.
Elspeth is partnered by Lachlan McLean
In clerical collar, her holy swain.
Cy Becker the scribe on his honeymoon
Foots it with Mistress McIntoon;
While Carmen has found a man to coach her,
None other than Donny Cleghorn the poacher.
But the richest couple this afternoon
Are Madeleine Ross and McIntoon.
Faithful Cerberus guards the door,
Popular Bobby clumps the floor,
Spoilsport Madeleine came to stay,
They're sorry their Madeleine's going away.

Could ever there be a wilder pleasure
A sweeter abandon: a madder measure

Than is danced by Balgersho the bold bad groom
And his naughty Fiona around the room?
Couple by couple the rest fall out
And panting, they watch the wonderful rout
As resplendent Tarr and lovely Kilburnie
Dance a symbolical nuptial journey,
All piously pray that nothing will mar
The connubial bliss of Kilburnie and Tarr.

Digby admires and is put in mind
Of a parallel thing of a different kind,
Another Queen soars on a wedding flight
Pursued by her suitors to giddy height
Till only one ultimate drone remains,
The strongest drone is the one who gains.
No one would question Balgersho's claim
To a similar place in human fame
But it's very lucky for Digby that he
Won a pyrrhic battle for this Queen Bee.

Faster and faster is Andrew's beat
And still that precision in flying feet,
Such caprice and caper and variation
Such a terpsichorean celebration.
Up and down and round the bend
This Highland Schottische must never end.
But end it does ; indeed now
It ends with a cataclysmic wow.

Animal, vedge, and mineral must
Crumble eventually back to dust.
It may come quick or it may come slow,
Sooner or later all must go.
But a very rapid demise is here
For the famous half-ton chandelier.
One moment it twinkles like starlit sky
The next drops silently from on high

Strikes the floor with a thunderous crash
And all those myriad slivers smash.
The noble cairngorm is buried deep
In a glittering shattered glassy heap.

The spectators are safe, lining the wall
The Bride and her Groom just escape the fall;
There are anxious looks at Fiona fair,
People know how deeply she's sure to care;
And certainly no one would put it past her
To do something violent at this disaster.

But she simply laughs
Tilts goblet, quaffs
A pint of bad champagne
Down
Her
Bonny
Red
Lane.

"Hallo there," said Digby, and he entered the room of grouse and strawberries, and Madeleine not so long ago.

Hamish was wearing a suit for going away, which made him look different but no less raffish. He would be as much the pirate in Bond Street or on Fifth Avenue as here among his native hills. "Old Pranger's pretty well had it." He nodded at his henchman who lay comatose on the sofa, moustache stirring with each breath.

"I wouldn't wonder," said Digby. "After flying all night and dodging jets and what he's been through since."

But Pranger sat up with a jerk. "I'm ticket-boo, Wings," he protested. "Chute on, fully alerted, ready to scramble. Oh, hallo Dig, you old wizard."

"Is Queenie ready?"

"I'll ask." He went half-way upstairs. "Madeleine!" She looked over. "Is she ready?"

Madeleine shook her head. "Not quite," she whispered. "The

poor child's been crying. She says she can't bear the thought of facing the unknown, but Nanny comforted her."

Digby leaned against the wall. He had laughed a good deal to-day. Now he giggled weakly.

"Quiet!" hissed Madeleine. "I do think you're a mean heartless man sometimes." She stamped her well-shod foot and went upstairs.

Hamish prowled over to the bookcase, took out Annie S. Swan, but absently, put her back. He was not a literary man. "Well," he said, turning round. "We finally got spliced up."

"You certainly did. Tell me, Hamish, are Highland weddings often like yours?"

Hamish smiled and shook his head. "Not often, I would say." He was restless. He went over and looked at the throng milling on the ground below. Rasp of feet and buzz of talk blended. The two stags roared again in quick succession. "Good God!" he said. "They're making passes at the kite."

The beasts had ceased battling one another. They now stood close to the blue monoplane, heads low, ruffs distended, antlers weaving. They roared. The passes were hostile, not affectionate. They sensed a rival in this wide-antlered machine.

"Scramble, Pranger! Get rid of them! Start the engine! Run her up!"

Pranger scrambled without a word.

Hamish came away from the window. He was that calibre of man. He trusted his Pal Pranger, and for good reason. Besides, it was implicit in their relationship that Pranger would deliver the goods, or Pranger would get hell.

"Well, Digby," he said soberly. "I hope you've enjoyed yourself. As everyone says *ad nauseam*, we're going to miss you."

"I shall miss you too," said Digby. "This is the loveliest, craziest country I ever was in. I'm not even sure it exists."

Hamish laughed. "I sometimes wonder that myself. It can't be as mad as America though, surely."

"Madder. Far more cunning mad. For example, over there they don't come like Galbraith."

"Lucky for you." But Hamish was pensive. "Well, I suppose we'll see you and Madeleine again some day. You'll come back here;

or Queenie and I might take a trip to America before we get too long in the tooth to enjoy it. Years hence you may get a warning cable."

"That would be swell," said Digby, not quite sure how swell it would be. "You still haven't told me where you're spending the honeymoon, or is that a secret?"

"Thanks to Digby P. Ross's wedding cash, we've taken a hell of a suite at the Cally in Edinburgh. That's for a night or two. And I've booked another at Claridges. The city lights for us. Fiona says she wants to be able to get up and go dancing whenever she feels like it. To be more accurate, whenever *I* feel like it. Don't you think I handle the woman well, Digby old boy?"

"Superbly," said Digby. "Don't be too severe though. She's a mettlesome girl, and I'd hate to think of her subdued. She wouldn't be Fiona then."

"Don't you worry," Hamish said. "She'll have the pants off me in no time. Well, after the honeymoon we shall set up house in my pre-fab, and the babies will start rolling in. Isn't she wonderful? Boys, she wants, whole platoons of men-children."

"Seven, isn't it?" said Digby thoughtlessly, and received a cold speculative glance from his Lordship of Balgersho. Outside, the engine had roared up to full revs and subsided to a putter again.

Fiona danced in through the door with a skip and a hop and a twinkle of high-heeled shoes. She sank in an exquisite curtsy to her husband. He took both her hands. "My God," he said. "You're a hopeless marvellous woman."

Fiona smiled, her eyes misty from that fear of the unknown. It was true love of their own kind between Hamish and Fiona. She rose. She wore a plain grey coat and skirt, a white piqué blouse, a small grey beret cocked on her burnished head. No jewellery, no ornament whatever except the rings on her wedding finger, and a few green feathers in the beret. They were the curled tail-plumes of the drake mallard. No brooch, no tartan, no Highland traces. She was the bride universal.

Madeleine stood behind, vicariously bright-eyed too. Poor dear Nanny wept in the doorway.

Ah, Woman! Digby thought, and picked up Hamish's suitcase.

" Give me one minute," he said as he went out. He collected Fiona's case. " They'll be right down," he called at the door of the East Tower, and all the confetti-clasping guests lined the path. There had been a little rice as well, obtained by a racket. But the Colonel was outraged at such a waste of rare food, and he had stolen it for Bridget Moloney.

Digby hurried down and through the gate. He shut it behind him because the Royal Stags still lurked menacingly beyond the plane.

Pranger got out to stow the luggage. " I don't know what the hell to do," he said, much upset. " I can't get rid of the sods." He ran bravely at the bellowing stags, but the heads only came lower, the antlers weaved more threateningly. It was an impasse.

Now cheers rang out, confetti fell in multi-coloured showers, and Colonel Galbraith tied an ancient boot to the tail-strut.

" I told you to get rid of them, Pranger."

" I know, Wings old boy. But I can't shift the bastards. A shot-gun squirt's the only hope."

" I'll soon sort them," cried Fiona. She strode forward, pale at the nostrils, stopped a yard or two from the menacing stags, then raised her arms wide in that splendidly flamboyant gesture she had made at the Gathering. " Gudgey Brutes! "

The great beasts turned and slunk away.

" Good-bye, Hamish—Good-bye, Digby old boy and many thanks —See you soon, Pranger, you old twot—God bless, Wings—Good luck, Fiona. Be good!—Aechi-va Prissitulchan. You'll always be my hero as I was saying—Good-bye Madeleine, my poppet—Good-bye Colonel—Good-bye Uncle Farquie and thank you for such a grand speech—Good-bye Madeleine darling you've been so sweet I do hope we'll meet again sometime—Good-bye Fiona, darling. All the happiness in the world."

Doors shut; a blast of wind and hats and hair flying; a take-off straight down the park, back now overhead with the Colonel's boot streaming out behind, and a dip this way and a dip that, salute to waving handkerchiefs and unheard cheers, off South to Edinburgh en route for London and dancing when they feel like it. God speed to Lord and Lady Balgersho.

It was nearly six. " Madeleine, we must leave right away if we're going to reach Achnasheen to-night."

" I know. Oh dear, I hate to go."

" We'll say good-bye now, Colonel. I don't know how to express . . ."

" Patience, gaffer! Less of this doughboy-hustle. We're not done with you yet. Pay attention, everybody! M'Lord Duke, boys and girls, the Rosses are leaving, and we're going to give them a hotcha send-off. But first a small ceremony. Dougald, are you ready? "

Digby had wondered why Dougald the sly factotum was tuning his pipes round by the garage. He marched forward now, halted, drew a folded sheet from his right pocket, extended it to Digby and said: " With Mr. Ross's permission I'm to play the Lament for Digby P. Ross, composed by me and dedicated to Mr. Ross's memory."

Digby collected himself. Was there a catch in this? He bowed. " Please do," he said with equal solemnity.

Dougald played his lament, his pibroch, pacing slowly to and fro before the East Tower at the Birks. It was a mournful dirge, no tune at all, and yet those notes drew at the heart. They sounded to old walls and to trees and to the hill and back. It was the music of that Highland place. Nobody stirred, neither man nor leaf. He finished; they clapped after the silence.

" Thank you, Dougald. Thank you, everybody. I can't say how much. . . . Madeleine, you tell them."

" I hope you'll miss us just a little bit. We're going to miss you terribly."

So into the Cadillac, and the tearful Colonel kissed Madeleine yet again. " Good-bye, Ross. Three cheers for the Salvation Army." What a dirty little parting crack. " Cheeribye, Digby! " called MacLagan, who would have vague memories only of this farewell and wear a more biblical dignity than ever on the painful morrow. " Cheeroh, old Dig, you wizard. Good-bye, Mrs. Ross, you're a humdinger too." Even Pranger quite lachrymose.

" Sing up! " cried the Colonel. " Sing with me." And he led the throng in a version of Bonny Prince Charlie's song:

Bonny Rosses noo' awa'
Sailing o'er the western main
Mony a hearrt will brak in twa
Should ye no come back again.

" Drive off, Digby P.! Get going! " They got going while the whole company sang this at the end of a wedding day.

The song followed them a long way down the drive. They passed the routed stags which once more were giving battle, and drove through ivied gates, waving in answer to Constable McIntoon's salute, and went down the slope to that narrow bridge, turned right and passed above the Shepherd's, Bannock, Carry, and the Piper's pool where Digby had taken a great fish, on through the Bloody Gorge no longer bloody, over the bridge and left at junction of Bal and Kil, past a herd of amiable ferocious Highland cattle, through a last gate and on to the highway.

" Bump," said Digby. " Down to earth."

" Thanks for the compliment." She sounded carpy.

They sailed from Greenock five days later.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

DIGBY WATCHED through the open porthole. He was a part out there with the yachts in a sailing breeze up the Gareloch, and he was a part closer in with the alien infant sea as it slipped along, and he was a part inside the ship in his A Deck cabin.

"Well, here we are," he said, meaning *Good-bye, Scotland,* and coming away from the porthole.

"You've been sighing like a grampus these last ten minutes," said Madeleine from the armchair. She wore that bloom about her, but she was captious too, wife ready to be irritated by husband. "I don't know what you have to sigh about, darling."

"I don't," he said, being patient. Why shouldn't anybody sigh if he wanted to? "I was thinking, was all."

But there was a knock on the door. "Come!" she said, a mildly annoying thing to say instead of Come in, like *Come, Varlet!*

It was their own steward, a pale fat man called Ransome, a comfortable guy, he seemed. "Purser's compliments, Mr. Ross, and he thinks it must be for you, sir. Come aboard just before we sailed." He held out orange envelope on silvery salver, beaming like the fond old institution family butler in plays and books. Too good to be true, but he might be all the same. *You just don't know,* was Digby's philosophical theme-song this sailing afternoon.

"Thanks, Ransome." He looked at the wire, addressed to Digby P. and the ship's name—adequate to locate, positive information as to source up there in cloud-cuckoo land at Glendrogan.

Ransome with the moon-face went away. Digby opened and read: "GOD SAVE THE ROSSES AND AMERICA GALBRAITH." What a typical crazy-sounding wire.

"Farquie always says whatever comes into his head. And I expect

GOD SAVE is very complimentary from an English person the way they keep singing God Save the King. It's sweet of him to think of us. You do like Farquie, don't you, Digby?" She was still in the you-dare-disagree-with-what-and-whom-I-like mood. She had a soft spot for the Colonel. No wonder, when he used to dote on her from morning to night.

"I like him in retrospect," Digby said. "But there were plenty times I could have strangled him. And look at the rackets the old rogue was in—when you think how we fed there as if rationing didn't exist, and then everywhere else in Scotland we find they're really short of food, or of good food."

"You want everybody to be perfect," said Madeleine.

"No, I don't," he said at the porthole again. Why was she like this to-day? "I want everybody to be themselves. I'll go my way and they can go theirs and we can live in peace." Which might not be strictly what he wanted.

"That's just it. You go your own selfish way." Well now, she was crying, for God's sake.

"What is it, darling? Haven't we had the best time ever together lately?"

"I know, and it's nearly over, and I've been wanting to talk to you ever since we came on the ship, but how can I when all you do is sigh and groan and prowl around and be disagreeable. You spoil everything."

Digby removed his sad wife from the chair, sat down himself and placed her on top. "Now come clean. What's it all about?"

"All I want to tell you is I'm having a baby."

A baby? A son? Digby P. Ross Third?

"Aren't you going to say anything? Aren't you pleased?"

"Pleased! I'll say. . . . But how do you know? How can you possibly tell . . .?"

"Because I just had a sort of hunchy feeling, and I'd heard of a marvellous new test; so instead of shopping as I told you this morning, I was seeing this man in Glasgow who discovered it."

"Rabbits?"

"No, darling. It used to be rabbits. This is something with frogs, and they know in a minute from the very day."

" Froggy would a-wooing go," said Digby, too happy at these tidings to know much of anything he said. " Poor Froggy."

" It doesn't hurt the frogs a bit. I asked." She was always feeling sympathetic towards frogs and things; it was a mystery how she had brought herself to kill a stag and a grouse and a salmon. Come to think of it, all her Highland behaviour was mysterious.

" You will rest, won't you, Madeleine," he said in a while. " It's been a tiring day. And promise not to do my unpacking? "

" All right, darling. Now off you go and play on deck."

But Digby did not go immediately on deck. *Pre-natal care*, he said to himself as he hurried along rubbery corridors with all the white pipes overhead, and signs to Men and Ladies and Muster Stations, and axes in glass cases, and the hum and creak of a ship on her way. *Breakfast in bed, and gentle healthful exercise. When she's irritable, which she will be of course, I'll give her a kiss and turn the other cheek, and I won't bring work back from the office not if I can help it, I really won't.* " I beg your pardon, sir. Entirely my fault. I do apologise." *Ran right into the poor old guy. Yes, and if she develops those queer appetites some women do, I believe, like eating peanuts all day or raw carrots I don't wonder they get such indigestion, or wanting to do over the whole apartment, I'll encourage her. Then the morning nausea, oh poor Madeleine, and the discomfort, not to mention. . . . But first get her safely on dry land.*

" Come in! " He was an oldish man in uniform with the red armbands beside gold.

" Good afternoon, Doctor. My name is Ross. I would like to ask your professional advice, it's not for myself exactly, but . . ."

" Sit down, Mr. Ross. What can I do for you? "

" The thing is, Doctor. Well, you see my wife is expecting a first baby, and she's thirty-two, and I naturally am anxious about an ocean crossing at such a delicate time . . ."

The doctor nodded. " Naturally," he said. " But nowadays we can control sea-sickness. Tell me, Mr. Ross, how far advanced is the pregnancy? "

" How far. . . . When did she start do you mean? Now let me see, it's ten—twelve. Yes, it can't be more than twelve days."

" *Days?* "

"Yes, days." What does he think I meant, months? Oh well, it could be weeks.

The Ship's Surgeon pursed lips, clenched teeth, struggled with himself, and burst into loud laughter. He was a fool. He was a rude ill-mannered fool of a Ship's Surgeon or Doctor. "I'm sorry, Mr. Ross," he wheezed eventually. "But how is it possible to know after a maximum of twelve days?"

"Because of this new frog-test," Digby said stiffly. "My wife had it in Glasgow this morning. It lets you know in a minute."

"Good Heavens," said the doctor. "I must have missed that one! I wonder what they'll think up next. Sex probably. Yes, they'll tell you next morning it's a boy. And a pity too, in my opinion. The more we master nature, the more abominable the human race becomes." He cleared his throat. "I hope you'll forgive me for laughing. Lack of medical dignity is a weakness of mine, and partly accounts for my present position. Now to be serious. I think you said Mrs. Ross is thirty-two—a perfectly reasonable age to start child-bearing. Is she in good health?"

"I think so. I've never seen her look so well."

"Splendid. I suppose the frogs speak truth; these new-fangled mumbo-jumbos generally do. Well, Mr. Ross, your wife should go on exactly as usual in moderation and live a healthy restful life with no over-excitement. . . . . .

"I expect you're very pleased, are you?"

Digby looked down. "Yes," he said. "Yes, I am."

"Did she know you were coming to see me?"

"No."

"Sometimes women don't appreciate their husbands dashing off to doctors. You might be wiser not to tell her that you've been. I always say it's a good thing for a father to start a pregnancy on the right foot, and yours will be a long one."

Digby laughed. "That sounds like good advice. Thank you, Doctor." Despite his terrible bedside manner and an archaic attitude in medical matters, he seemed a wise old bird.

He went up two decks and along. I'll just pop my head in, he thought, to see if she needs anything.

"Come!" she called, but it did not annoy him, even mildly. *Come, Daddy Ross.*

Madeleine was sitting dressed on her bed. Cabin trunks and suitcases lay around half unpacked. She did not look up. She was holding two dog-eared sheets of foolscap paper, one in each hand.

Oh God! Digby thought. *She's found it.* And his great delight at the news of the child—a boy or a girl, what did it matter as long as Madeleine was all right—all that left him because the one thing he intended she should never see was his poem at the Gathering of Clan Kilburnie. He had stowed it between two shirts.

"You promised you would leave my cases," he said sharply, forgetting good resolutions. *Now she's going to look up and laugh about my little rhyme in kilts.*

He went to that porthole. They were sailing nearly south, and the sun came in over land close on the starboard beam. It would be the Island of Bute. Who cared one little goddam about the Island of Bute? "Well," he said, staring out. "Satisfied now?" Why didn't she make her facetious remark and get it over with, damn the woman?

"Digby! Look at me!"

He turned. She was not laughing. She stared at him and then down. "Did you write all of this?"

He nodded.

Madeleine dropped the two sheets of paper. They lay haphazard on her lap, and she touched them each with a forefinger—tap tap tap of nails. "Oh, what a little fool I am!"

"Why, Madeleine? I guess I don't mind you reading it if you really want to. It was only that I . . ."

"To think I've been married to you all these years, and I never guessed. I never knew from those things you said occasionally which would come back to my mind. Oh, Digby!"

"Do you like it, then?"

"It isn't liking or not liking. It's knowing that you're a poet. It's knowing for sure and for certain about my conventional businessman husband. Oh darling, to think of how I've let you waste your life and how I've wasted mine over so-called poets without a hundredth part of your gift. It's true this is rough and uneven, changing from

Love's young excursion by the river, not *young love's* which would be banal, but *love's young* which gives the feeling so perfectly and all the meanings. Oh I know you probably think I'm bogus, but I can tell, darling, I really can. Changing, I mean, from that lyrical feeling to the menace of the raven, and then the merciless murder scene. And then I wonder if that isn't just the very best thing about it, those staccato changes."

Madeleine stopped. She continued to stare at him in joyful half-believing, all-believing discovery, much as Columbus might have stared at San Salvador, his landfall. But with this difference—for Columbus the future said question against a low-lying shore; for Madeleine the future said no question. Her husband had become her altogether man.

I knew it, of course, Digby thought, picking up shirts. I knew I had something. She's a good judge too; she must be to see it as clearly and quickly as that, and she expresses it so well considering how corny she used to sound about other people's stuff. But be careful now. I can read what's in her mind. I must break it very gently that I've given up poetry for good and all after one effort. No arty life for me, no sir.

"Take it easy, darling," he said. "Lots of people have a second talent they don't develop, can't afford to develop. Besides . . ."

"I'll give up everything," she cried fiercely. "Why couldn't we live all year round at the fishing-camp if that gave you inspiration?

"But I don't want to write verses, I just want to go on being what I am—which is a business man and a pretty good one too at that, although I say it myself. Besides, a two-page poem doesn't prove a thing—couldn't."

"It could prove everything," she said more quietly. "But of course you're good at business, darling. You're good at whatever you do." Madeleine smiled. *He must be such a grand lover. Isn't he, Madeleine?* Fiona said one day. Thank God I rescued you from that woman's clutches. No more Fionas, not if I have to shoot them dead." She was still the same Madeleine despite her discovery. "But this is the only thing you have a genius for, just this." She arched her hands and spread all the long fingers on his hallowed sheets of

paper. "You *will* let me send it to Franklin Days at the Beacon, won't you?"

"But the Beacon's the most high-brow . . ."

"I know it is. And only last month Franklin was saying how sad it is that the epic poem is never written in this epic age. You *will* let me . . ."

"We'll see, darling. We can discuss all that later. Now don't you think you should have a little sleep? It's been such a long day."

"I'm not tired. I don't want to have little sleeps. I want to talk and talk about your poetry and then you say have a little sleep."

"But, Madeleine, you know they advise a calm, healthy, restful life. It's most important that there should be no over-excitement or undue fatigue at this stage. You have to think of the baby."

"Oh, damn the baby!" Madeleine stared at him again, but not with adulation. It was a narrowing, hostile, clairvoyant gaze. "Do you mean to tell me . . ." she demanded. "Do you mean to tell me you've been asking someone? Yes, I can see it in your face. You've been to the ship's doctor, that's where you've been."

Digby hung his head. Oh, to be a liar. "Checking up on pre-natal care," he mumbled. "Natural thing to do."

"How dare you! I can just hear you asking pompous questions, and telling him; *Let me see, Doctor, my estimate would be ten days, yes a ten days' pregnancy more or less approximately* in that silly solemn way of yours. And who else did you tell? Did you run to the Stewardess with a fat tip and say: *Mrs. Ross is in a delicate condition. I shall be grateful if you will give her every possible care. Thank you so much.*

"I didn't tell another soul." Actually, the Cabin Stewardess had been the very next item on his pre-natal schedule.

"You make a fool of me. You make a fool of me in everything. You make a fool of me with that wench Fiona; you make a fool of me by suddenly being a poet; you even make a fool of me by getting your inspiration from another woman, don't think I haven't been thinking of that either; now you make a fool of me by running off to tell all and sundry about the baby which I wanted to be an absolute secret for months and months."

Turn the other cheek. Turn it always. "Cross my heart," Digby

said. "Never another whisper till you say so. I'm sorry for being such a dope, but I'm all come over queer at the good news." He glanced at her. Risk a joke? "I'm a wonderful guy. You just said so before you changed your mind."

"You're hopeless. Come here." It was peace again as the ship sailed down the Firth of Clyde.

"Oh, I'm so proud of you, and just to think I was dreading the thought of going home, and now I'm going to be happy from morning to night for ever and ever and no more Hamishes and Fionas even if they did bring us together."

"I'm going on deck. Haven't been up since we sailed. Who knows, I might find inspiration."

"I won't have you making fun of it. Well, perhaps I will rest now just for a little while. Good-bye, darling. Don't be too long."

He went out. *Sure is gonna be a tough pregnancy*, he thought and smiled. He went on to the Promenade Deck which was crowded, and along that, and up the companionway in fresh air with a nip, past the ship's boats, and to the open highest deck of funnels, ventilators, skylights and so on, a whistle and buffet of wind, a crying of gulls, a feeling of ship. He loved ships, not the closed-in pampered portions, but up here or the poop, or most of all the Bridge. Perhaps this was the kind of Captain who would let a fellow sneak up there humbly and pretend to be a sailor boy.

Because the thing Digby had always hankered to be was not a glorified construction man, nor a *one of our most able younger business leaders*, nor a poet—goodness, it was going to be some job making her forget his true genius and vocation—what he had always longed to be was a sailor.

He went first to the starboard side. They were passing close to the Island of Arran. It was green and it was steep. The sea was rough, although a trifle to so large a ship, and the tops of white-horses were beginning to fly on the wind. He looked forward past the bridge where the Captain, the high and mighty Master, wore a gold-braided cap and great responsibilities.

He stood at the rail looking aft. The gulls wheeled and sailed, and dived to make discordant scavenge-centres in the wash, and rose again to fly up distance; but a majority lay here overhead on the airs

of the ship, white herring gulls and brown, cold eyes, hooked-over yellow bills, the merciless gulls.

You know, he thought, watching the fair Firth of Clyde. You know, that wickedness did me good. What an anomaly, but I do believe I'm a more reasonable fellow since I wandered from the primrose path. Is that why they seemed to like me better than people ever liked me in my life? Because I was a bit more human.

And here's another thing—was I a poet, or was I a guy who suffered a strange disease of rhyme and purged myself by one big dose of poetical cascara? But purged it is, not least because of that gleam in her eye, that gleam of making ME her cultural discovery. *Did you hear the latest? Madeleine's made a poet out of Digby. Isn't that the best laugh ever?* What a hideous notion for Prissy Ross. No, I'll shilly-shally, dilly-dally through the difficult dangerous months ahead —oh dear, I can feel the sick anxiety already—and gradually this poetry furore will die away. I'm a one-poem man, if it was a poem. Golly, I'm mad about her. You know, it's a very very strange thing falling in love with your own wife. Why it's sort of almost downright immoral.

Scotland fell astern. It's been the best time of my life, he thought, even if they used me and abused me, even if my contributions to the slaking of Galbraith's thirst, and to the Gathering, and in tips, and to the consummation of Hamish and Fiona, the last-named being an enormous item—even if all this ran into a mighty big pile of dollars, and was anybody grateful? I wonder. I don't see it matters much.

I'll allow as how some of these were the strangest human animals I ever encountered. What, for example, does the Colonel contribute to mankind? What do Hamish and Fiona create? Just plain nothing till the boys start rolling in, and that'll be a dubious creation, yes sir. The one thing they do have is a—how can I say it?—a sort of mastery of life and living and environment. They are masters of doing little; we in America are victims of doing much.

Good-bye then, to the kind Scottish people, and thank you for a most worthwhile interlude, and thank you for making a real couple out of Madeleine and me. Yes, we're a real American husband and wife. But you're not real: you're the players in my extravaganza

of the Highlands. I shall remember you, and not be quite sure you happened. And will I be glad to get back among sensible Americans. Oh boy, will I! But thanks a million.

Perhaps in twenty years, my boy Digby P. Ross Third will be at the age for a broadening experience. I shall say to him: *Off you go, young fella, to spend a month with the Balgershos. I was his best man once. Watch these people. Study them. Take them with several grains of salt. Don't let them fool you. Don't lend them money. Never lend money. Better to give it, as your grandfather told me long ago. But above all avoid lending or giving to the Tarrs of Balgersho. Now, if you must dance a Highland Fling with some Scotch girl, dance it discreetly in the heather. Always cherish the fair name of a woman. If you must drink, then use liquor as an American gentleman should. There you are, my boy. Go sow yourself a few wild oats; go learn what life is all about.* Oh, I shall be a wise and excellent parent.

But his happy fancies ended, and in their place came a dagger of accusatory anxiety: How dare you dream ahead that way when Madeleine hasn't had the baby, hasn't nearly braved the perils. Brave is right; she's a plucky girl. I don't know how I'm going to stand it. I can't bear to think . . .

There's a notion starting, a tiny roll. I'd better get that pill from the doctor.

Digby moved to the port side of this high deck. He looked across some miles of white-capped water to the coast of Ayrshire. There were no small boats in sight on this stormy evening.

But the liner was not alone. A little off the port bow and steering a similar course, and bucking and rolling in lively fashion, was a pleasure steamer, one of those vessels which ply the sheltered waters, giving humanity a breath of sea air without the unease of solitude.

It was not excursion weather, but the top deck was crowded. Hardy folk, these Scots. The little ship was dressed overall, a gay fluttering of flags all the way up from bow, and from mast to mast, and down to stern. Between masts and below flags stretched a banner, a strip of white cloth, upon it in giant letters: *SCOTLAND FOR EVER.*

As she fell back, a sound came on the strong east wind. It was the wailing of many bagpipes, and not the pipes alone, for drums rapped

out staccato emphasis of measure, and rolled in burgeoning tattoo, and the big drum tomped behind it all. That crowd was not a crowd but a pipe band in full dress on parade, miraculously steady on the heaving deck.

Into another galloping melody while the wicked gulls lay overhead, and wheeled to bicker over titbits in the wash, and made their melancholy cries, and wind sighed and slatted ropes and boomed up high around the funnels.

Here was the indomitable tale of Scotland—the independence, the fiery pride, the intensity of spirit which had taken her sons and daughters to the far places of the earth. Here was the story of the children at the hearth, and of the exiled children. *They not only love their rugged homeland*, he thought. *They are in love with her.* This small ship flaunts that love. For me, she will always be Scotland; she will be the picture that comes to mind. Two generations since my grandfather, a shepherd's son, sailed to the west, and I am a stranger in this land. America is my home. But I, too, have a Scottish corner in my heart.

Digby saw the gallant ship through tears, and was not ashamed. *I shall not forget*, he thought. *Never shall I forget this parting from the country of my father's people.*

The steamer was close. Soon she would swing to port and head away into the teeth of wind for home.

She hooted now—one long blast. That would be *Good-bye and Godspeed across the ocean*, to her great sister. Above Digby's head the foghorn answered—a sonorous all-engulfing acknowledgment. *Good-bye! Sail home small ship!*

But just after that he heard another sound. It was the clinking trill of the engine-room telegraph on the bridge, and immediately a lessening of vibration underfoot.

This was not a parting, but a meeting. Surely not the pilot boat? No, impossible. He hurried down one deck and found himself a place just above the companion-ladder. Digby was an inveterate kibitzer of the ocean.

It seemed like a risky manœuvre in this sea, although perhaps not, for the Captain leaned nonchalantly over the wing of his bridge. Big ship and small ship converged.

And now the Pipe Band burst into *Highland Laddie*, that tune which had swept kilted soldiers into many battles. They were right below him, those pipers, those kettle-drummers, that big drummer in his tiger-skin, that drum major twirling silver stick; and Digby saw that the flags which streamed all the way up and along and down were not marine flags—they were of every conceivable Highland tartan.

The ships sailed side by side. It was twenty feet, it was ten feet, it was any moment now. Yes, they had met, and a sailor waited down there on the platform at the foot. He was a fine-looking young sailor with an eager Scottish face. He extended a hand.

Lady Balgersho, née Fiona Kilburnie of the Birks, jumped lithely and blithely in her kilt. She took the steep steps two at a time as if she had been doing this sort of thing all her life, not only as a wartime Wren at Oban. Hamish now crossed too.

Good Heavens? thought Digby. They've come to see us off. I must say that's a pretty swell thing for them to do. He cupped hands. "Hi!" he shouted against the skirling pipes. "Hi there, Hamish!"

Balgersho looked up and saw him almost at once. "Hallo, Digby," he called back. "Come down!"

Digby raced downstairs around the elevator past potted palms in a great hurry because this would be a brief meeting and farewell. He ran full tilt into them just as he reached the A Deck level.

"Och, Digby!" cried Fiona, and threw herself on his neck. "My goodness it's grand to see you so soon again. We're going to have a most wonderful time on the ship."

He was too dumbfounded even to disengage himself. "You're *sailing* on this ship?"

"Yes, old boy," said Hamish. He roared with laughter, twice as devilish and far more ebullient than usual. "Let the woman go now, in case it becomes a habit."

Digby broke from Fiona with the repulsive alacrity of one North Pole from another.

"You see, we had the idea originally just after we got engaged, but I thought it better not to raise your hopes too soon. I got in touch with a pal of mine, one of the top boys in the British Council.

So he checked at the Embassy and telephoned back—*If Digby P. Ross is your main contact and close friend, I think there might possibly be a case for sending you over, because the American Industrialists are apt to be somewhat of a hard core of resistance over matters British at the present time, and Mr. Ross's support would doubtless be invaluable. But I can't promise, and inevitably there will be delay.* His very words; they do get pompous, don't they?

" Well then, we only spent one night in Edinburgh because I was very keen to get this fixed, and we didn't feel that an ordinary honeymoon would quite give us scope for our energies. So on to London. You should have seen Queenie get to work on that chap; she had him gasping from the word go.

" The long and the short of it is that we're going to the U.S.A. to give a new line on British culture and aims and the excellence of our exports and all that boloney. And thanks to your most generous wedding present, I had enough to pay for the tickets. So they agreed—it isn't going to cost them a thing apart from expense money."

" You see, Digby, Hamie is going to make some speeches and the Scottish Office is sponsoring us too and all that send-off just now was from the Scotland For Ever League and we're going to hold Gatherings everywhere, joint ones for Kilburnies and Tarrs because they must get used to being friends . . ."

At which Hamish groaned, and Fiona's eyes flashed at him, but she went on:

" You see, Digby, this is my great chance before I'm tied-down having babies and I'm going to sing songs and we'll dance Highland dances to packed audiences all the way across America but of course we'll be in New York first because I know you'll be simply longing to have us to stay and pay back some of all we did for you and I read in a book somewhere about American hospitality being sort of famous and could you let me have that poem you said at the Gathering because I think it would be an awfully good thing for me to recite in our programme you will won't you Digby? "

" No," he said. " I will not."

Hamish put his arm round Fiona's waist. " My lovely idiot, I keep telling you not to rush your fences. Give the poor chap time.

Well, I must say, Digby old boy, you might give us a warmer welcome."

"It's quite a surprise," said Digby. The dreadful news seethed into his guts.

"How's Madeleine?"

"Oh, fine. She's resting now." There were a lot of people hanging around—the Purser, stewards with tattered Balgersho baggage, passengers—every one of them listening avidly, and every male eye drinking in Fiona. But to Digby Ross her charms had ceased to speak.

"You see, Digby," she went on loudly before an admiring crowd which now blocked the stairs both up and down, and filled the vestibule of A deck. "We just had time to fly home and get our kilts and everything and my wedding dress with the sashes crossed at the bust because that's the one I'm going to wear when I sing and when I recite the poem and Uncle Farquie was awfully pleased when we told him so pleased that he laughed like anything and he said it was the best thing he'd heard of for years and he would send you a wire to the ship. Did he, Digby?"

"Yes, he did." *God save the Rosses and America.*

"Now we'd better find our cabin," Hamish said. "You'll fix up about a table for the four of us, won't you, Digby?"

"Well actually, Madeleine and I are sitting at the Captain's table."

Hamish threw up his spade-ended chin. "Ha, ha, ha!" in volleys of mirth. "Where else? I might have known it."

But the Chief Steward now stepped forward. "Lord Balgersho, the Captain sends his compliments, m'Lord, and would you and Lady Balgersho care to join him at his table?"

"What do you say, Queenie?"

"Fiona," she corrected. "Of course, darling. We want to be wherever Digby and Madeleine are."

"See you later then, Digby old boy."

"This way," said the Purser; he in person led them off to their cabin.

The crowd moved again, and it seemed to Digby that many people cast covert glances in his direction as they jostled past, mur-

muring: *I beg your pardon, Excuse me,* and *Pardon, Monsieur,* from a quizzical courtly Frenchman.

He was alone. Shall I go right away and break it to her? No, better not, better master myself.

Digby mounted yet again to the Promenade Deck where wind clapped and whistled beyond windows, and ventilators hummed, and the ship was beginning to creak—creak, creak in mild pleasurable grumble or complaint.

He strode aft, a tall distinguished figure, capturing the notice of men and women. But he did not observe their faces, nor fleetingly record the ladies' legs—as he would ordinarily have done out of a purely aesthetic interest.

He went through the door, closed it behind him, and the east wind's bluster was on his right cheek. He passed a barrier to the tourist accommodation—gate open, as always on sailing day. He stepped over a rope and climbed steps to the after-bridge. Here at last, he found solitude.

And to think . . . just to think that out of the goodness of my heart I agreed to be his Best Man, and worked my head off, and he makes use even of that—*My best pal, old boy. My Best Man, y'know. Longing to pay back some of our hospitality. Yes, of course he'll help over contacts. Fix the whole thing for us.* I can hear him.

And just to think that I'm the one who paid for their cabin on A Deck, not the British Council, nor the Scottish Office, nor these vultures themselves, but me, Digby Ross, poor rich sap.

And just to think how I've been planning ever since Madeleine told me the news, to think how I've been planning to start her every morning with some happy little thought before I go to the office. And I know, I know only too damn' well that she'll insist on having them to stay at the apartment. She'll say: *We can't Digby. We simply must not fail in hospitality.*

And just to think of the two of them arriving at head office, and the word will fly around, and every goddam male clerk will quit work to ogle Fiona in her kilt, and every goddam female clerk will quit work to ogle Hamish in his kilt. The whole place disrupted, dancing Highland dances on every floor. Finally Miss Prendergast

all coy blushes will show them in. *Hallo, old boy, we just popped up. —Och Digby I knew you'd have the brawest office.*

And just to think—the most annoying thought of all—that when they do finally, if ever, tour America, they sure as hell will make a million dollars.

The pleasure steamer was well away, heading north-east for home and Bonny Scotland. A few lights flickered ashore. The gulls still came with the ship, rapacious scavengers of the sea, crying of treachery. The wind blew stronger.

I must go get that pill from the doctor, he thought. Right now. Shall I give it to her first, or shall I tell her first?

"Beg pardon, Sirr!" It was the same sailor who had held a hand out for Fiona—a square-faced, carroty-headed, obstinate-looking, typical Scottish sailor with a cuttable accent. "Mr. McVitie, the Chief Awfficer's Cawmpliments, an' I'm to say passengers no' allowed on the after-bridge."

Digby's self-control snapped. He rounded on this representative of the country of his father's people. "Will you for God's sake not pester me?" he bellowed at the startled laddie. He had no missile to throw. Except for that he was right back where he had started from with Miss Prendergast.

Or was he? No, indeed. As Digby descended to the deck, he began to laugh. He laughed at himself. He laughed at this turbulent breed of Scots. He laughed at the whole hopeless human family. He laughed through a wild wind back to shelter.

The sailor stared after him, tapping his brow. "Fair daft," he muttered to himself. "A' them Yanks is daft."

THE END